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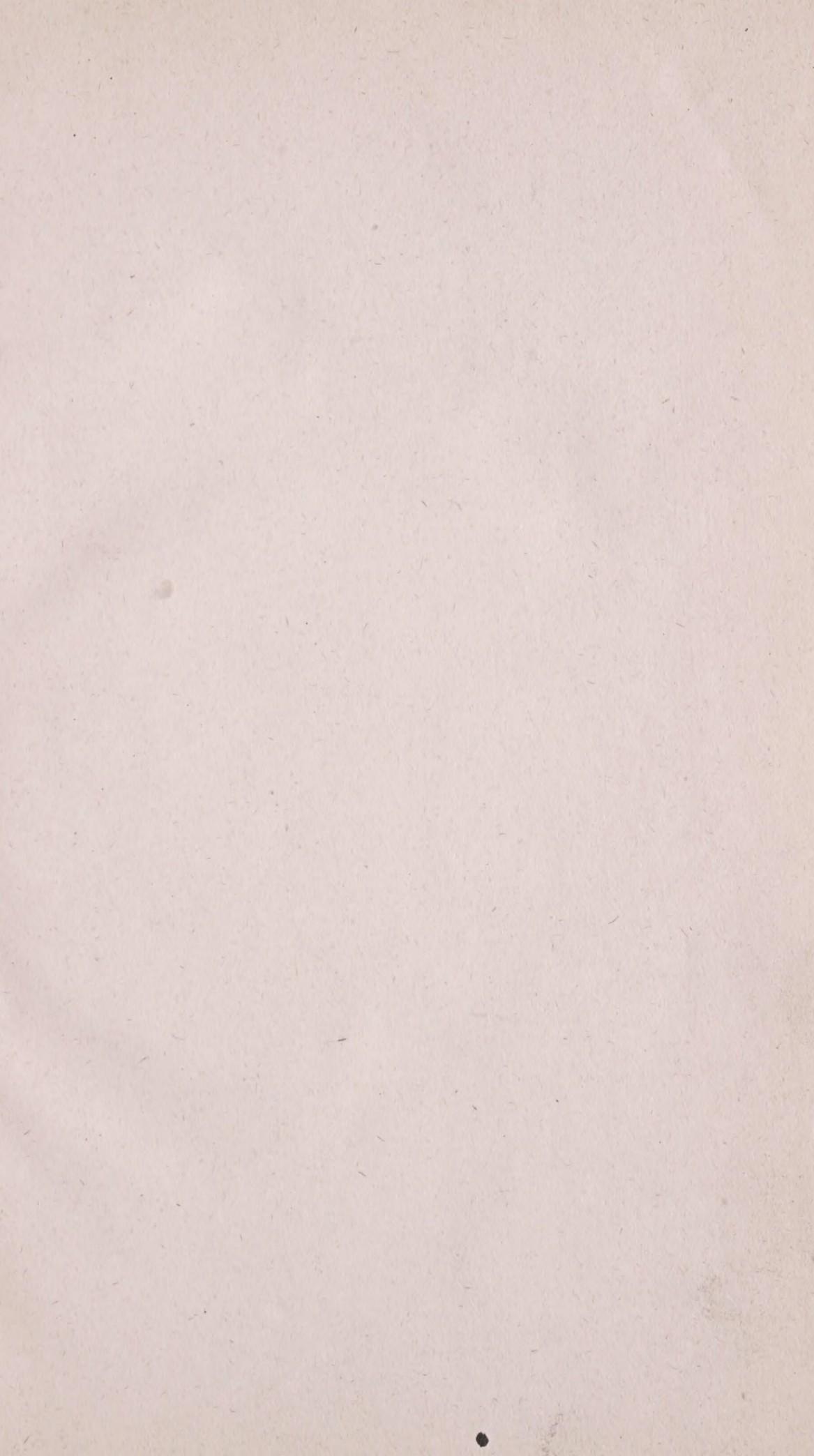
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# THE STOLEN CHILD.

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D. L. Johnson*

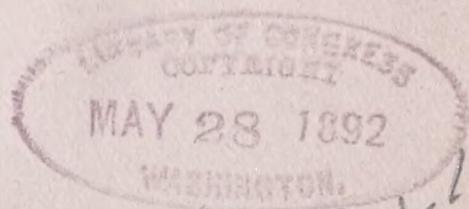
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# THE STOLEN CHILD.

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## CHAPTER I.

IT was a beautiful morning, the heavens clear and blue as the sea; a delicious odor emanated from the oak leaves which dilated the lungs and gave strength to the heart.

Catharine left her cottage and hastened to the edge of the wood, by the pathway which led to the main road of the village of Orsdael.

Although she walked rapidly, her eyes were fastened to the ground as one whose mind is bent under the weight of some anguish. Shaking her head, and turning her eyes towards the castle, with an expression of sadness, she thought without doubt of the fate of poor Martha Sweerts, of the bitter abuses to which she must each day submit, and of the fruitlessness of her efforts to discover the impenetrable secret.

Upon reaching the road she perceived about a hundred yards from her the steward of the castle. If she could only speak with Matthew, she would be delighted; for a week had passed since she had seen her friend, and perhaps this

occasion would allow her to slip in some word in her favor.

Quickening her steps, she overtook the steward, and joining him said in a sweet low voice:

"I wish you good morning, Mr. Matthew. How bright and fresh the air is! It makes one feel young again."

"Really beautiful weather . . . Good day," murmured Matthew without looking at the peasant.

At the same time he slackened his steps, as if he wished to remain behind.

Catherine walked on, then turning once more towards him, said:

"Pardon me for being so bold as to ask you a question; my respect and affection for you will excuse me. You seem ill; but I hope it will prove nothing."

"I am not ill," replied Matthew crossly.

"You are probably grieved? some one has perhaps annoyed you."

"Yes, I am grieved and angry. And you, Catherine, have worked against me more than all the others. But I would like to believe that you, as well as I, have been deceived by a false appearance."

"I, the cause of your sadness?" cried the peasant with astonishment. "Impossible, sir!"

"Have you not always exaggerated praise for the new governess? Have you not always painted your friend as a sweet, amiable, good woman?

Have you not made me believe that she was grateful for my friendship, and showed me some affection?"

"And is it not so, sir?"

"Be quiet Catherine! The governess is proud, rude and bad-tempered. In the beginning, she knew how to disguise her defects; but now she scarcely takes the trouble to answer me. I almost believe, when I reflect on her arrogant conduct, that she looks on me as her servant. But there will be an end to this. To protect her against the countess, I have laid myself open to quarrels and disputes from morning until night . . . and have been recompensed by a cold disdain. No, no, this cannot continue. I have already allowed my peace to be disturbed too long in the interest of such an ungrateful person. She must leave Orsdael!"

Surprised and deeply moved by these words, Catharine bowed her head and listened in dismay. She was perhaps absorbed in her thoughts, and was trying to find a way to ward off the fatal blow which threatened her unfortunate friend.

Matthew, delighted to find an opportunity of showing his ill temper, continued:

"You have read trouble in my countenance? Yes, I grant it: I have cause for it. How it happened, I do not know; but, from the first time I saw Martha, I felt a sincere affection for her, and have never ceased to protect and defend her. What return do I ask? A little friendship,

nothing more—and she, she appears to fear and hate me. That troubled me, but it is ended now; I also am beginning to dislike her. Do you know Catherine of what I was thinking when you interrupted me? Should I dismiss the governess to-morrow, or should I patiently wait eight days? It is natural that this news should grieve you; but you realize no doubt that you as well as I have been deceived in the character of your friend. . . . Ah, Catherine, how strangely you look at me!"'

The peasant fixed her eyes on him with an expression of grief and compassion, and silently shook her head.

"I do not understand you," murmured the astonished Matthew. "What is the meaning of that sad smile?"

"I dare not speak," said Catharine sighing. "Perhaps I would betray a secret that my poor friend wishes to conceal; but believe me, sir, your anger is groundless. If you could read Martha's heart, perhaps, in your turn, you would recognize that you are far from the truth."

"Yes, you still sing the same tune; but it is useless. You do not know how she behaves towards me; you do not see her haughty indifference. She shall leave the castle; my peace depends upon her departure; I do not wish to be despised by one who, without my aid, would never have set foot in Orsdael!"'

"And if her indifference is merely a blind to

hide a sentiment with which she reproaches herself?"

"A sentiment with which she reproaches herself!" repeated Matthew; "a sentiment of love?"

"Apparently."

"For whom?"

"Ah! that is her secret."

"You joke, Catherine, but that is nothing;" slackening his steps a little. "Explain to me what you mean?"

The peasant appeared to be frightened at so important a revelation. She stopped and looked around her to see if any one should be listening, and said in a hesitating voice:

"I do not know if I have done right to try and understand what is passing in my friend's heart; but to you also I owe something, and I cannot leave you in doubt. You know Martha has strict ideas of womanly modesty, and her heart is still as pure and simple as that of a young girl of twenty."

"What! You attempt to make me believe that"—

"It is very natural, sir. She was raised in a convent, and only left it to marry an old man whom she scarcely knew. Her husband died so short a time afterwards, it seems as if she had never been married."

"But in what does that concern me? Be more explicit."

"I am trying my best, sir, to make you un-

derstand what I dare not say openly. I beg you, have patience with me for a moment. . . . Perhaps you have already forgotten, but when the heart is still youthful there are times when one dreams day and night, when the same image is always before our eyes, when one struggles in vain against a sentiment one would wish to smother, but whose power predominates with a merciless tyranny. Then we become sad, and the person whose presence had moved us is exactly the one to whom we show indifference, to hide from him the secret of our weakness."

Catherine had purposely spoken in a slow and mysterious tone. She wished to make an impression on the mind of Matthew, and to awaken in his heart by ambiguous words a hope which would put an obstacle to Martha's departure. She seemed already to have partly attained her object; for a smile played around his lips, and he lowered his eyes with a thoughtful air. Nevertheless, he again shook his head with distrust.

"What does that signify?" said he, ironically. These are mere surmises, that prove nothing. Do you not know more? Why have you stopped me? Continue."

"Very well. The man whose image is always before her eyes, the man who has so deeply touched her heart, the man whom she loves with all the faint-heartedness of a first love"—

"Very well?"

"Suppose it were you, sir?"

"I? Nonsense; it is impossible," cried Matthew, who hid with trouble his emotion, and feigned complete incredulity, to draw from Catharine a secret the revelation of which would fill him with joy. "Martha could not be so indifferent to my love if she loved me. Did she tell you?"

"A woman—a woman pure and modest like Martha—never speaks of such things."

"How do you know it, then?"

"The governess is very confidential with me, sir; I have understood enough from her words to know that her mind is a prey to a secret passion. And, as she is always speaking of your amiability and your friendship, I believe I am right in saying it was of you she was thinking."

An ironical smile appeared on Matthew's lips, as he doubted Catharine's sincerity, although he was bewildered by the flattering hope which, by careful calculation, she had repeated word for word.

"So she never said anything about it to you?" he asked with an indifferent air. "It is nothing but an idea of yours. Go on, Catharine; I must go to the village; but I do not walk as fast as you."

Grieved at this apparent defeat, Catharine said to him in a suppliant voice:

"Then may I ask what you have decided in my friend's case? Ah! have pity on her! It

you take your generous protection from her, she will have no other means of support; perhaps she will be obliged to become a menial. A woman of birth, so accomplished and so well educated! May I not rely on your goodness, sir?"

"In two days she will have left Orsdael," answered Matthew, who thought that Catharine had not told all she knew, and that fear would make her reveal everything.

"I pray you, have pity on her," cried the peasant, in great alarm.

"Her ingratitude must be punished; and I want to regain my peace."

Catherine remained undecided for a few minutes; it was evident she was struggling with a deep emotion. Then sighing she put her mouth close to Matthew's ear and stammered in a trembling voice:

"You have wished it—you have torn from me the secret of my unhappy friend. Well! she loves you, she thinks of you, and this irresistible love is the cause of her grief. With tears in her eyes she has told me more than once. Are you satisfied now?"

The steward took the peasant by both hands, and looking in her eyes with mad delight, cried:

"Ah, Catherine, Catherine repeat it, confirm it! Is this indifference but the mask to hide a secret love? Martha loves me sincerely, with the purity of a first love? You are sure? She has

told you herself clearly and distinctly, in a way that cannot be misunderstood?"

"Alas! sir," sighed Catherine with sadness, "why have you dragged from me this information? I dare not appear before my friend after so disloyal an act."

"No, you are unnecessarily alarmed, Catherine. On the contrary, you should be thankful. Without you I should have been unjust; to-morrow she should have received orders to have quitted Orsdael forever."

"And now who knows if she will remain?"

"She will stay now, and if the Countess wishes to make her life miserable I will be able to protect her. Do not be troubled; I will reward you also. Your husband's salary will be increased; you will have more land to cultivate. Let us go, Catherine; as we walk we will talk of this affair. I now feel my feet light and my heart joyous."

They started on their route, the steward overcome with joy. Before to-morrow he would find Martha to ask forgiveness for his unfounded suspicions, and to make her understand with sweet words that he understood the cause of her grief.

Catherine continually sighed whilst he was talking.

"What grieves you now?" asked he; "you look as though you are going to cry."

Catherine was indeed very sad. To save her threatened friend she had had recourse to a dan-

gerous lie. What would happen now if the steward, emboldened by her false revelation, should persecute Martha with proofs of his affection? The rude reception of the steward would inflame him with anger, and the widow would be banished. Catherine did not know what to do; her sole hope was to bring this presumptuous man to conduct himself towards Martha with respect and moderation.

He repeated his question: "Well, why are you so distressed?"

"Your words frighten me, sir," she replied. "You intend to declare your love to my poor friend, and tell her that you know her heart is not indifferent to your love. In God's name, spare her this. Do not make her blush in your presence. She would certainly fly from Orsdael."

"What!" murmured Matthew, "now I do not understand you. She loves me; I love her. She dare not tell me; I wish to make the confession light and easy, and she will fly for that? It is as if one had committed a crime. What does all this mean? Are there still other secrets you have not told me of?"

"No, sir, there are no other secrets; but you should be just, and you cannot understand the delicacy of your position opposed to that of my unhappy friend. She is a modest woman. What are you to her? A master, who offers love to her. She is to you only a servant, who owes

obedience. It is natural she should try to hide a sentiment which would inspire her with fear and shame."

The steward shook his head and smiled at his thoughts, as if these words had caused him to reflect.

"It would be generous of you," continued Catherine, "to spare her timidity. You could not give a greater proof of affection than to content yourself with the revelation you have drawn from me. . . . Ah, I beg you, do not speak of love. You would wound her, and I must tell you she would leave Orsdael to protect her honor."

"Ah, well Catherine, rest easy. I know a means of overcoming all difficulties. To-morrow the governess will probably tell you the news that she has avowed her love without trembling or blushing."

The peasant looked at him with astonishment.

"It is very simple," he cried; "I am going to ask her to marry me. . . . Why do you exclaim? I have understood you. For a long time Martha has been to me only a servant, and would have cause to blush at my love; but if she would have the certainty of becoming my wife, she would on the contrary have a thousand reasons for being proud of my love for her. Do you not think so?"

"Yes, yes," stammered Catherine, "but what!"

You would propose marriage to her so quickly, to-morrow?"

"Why wait, and prolong her sadness? I have thought of it for a long while. After the happy assurance you have given me, there is no reason to hesitate."

"I believe she will be delighted . . . but if by chance she should refuse?"

"If she refuse," repeated the steward, with a look of defiance, "it will be a sign that you have deceived me, Catherine; and certainly after such an outrage to my feelings, I could not endure her presence a moment longer in the castle. But, bah! she could not refuse. This marriage will render her happier. I have a pretty little fortune; Martha will then have a life of comfort and independence."

Catherine walked silently for some time whilst Matthew rubbed his hands and gave himself up to pleasing thoughts. She stopped suddenly, saying:

"Excuse me, sir; it is a great compliment for the wife of a poor gardener to go to the village in company with her master; but it is necessary that I should go to the little farm, to get the linen, and the farmer's wife expected me at nine o'clock."

"Very well, Catherine, I wish you 'Good-morning.' The day after to-morrow you will hear that the governess is to become my wife. It will be a happy wedding, and as you have so

helped me, I will do what I can to assist you. Back of your house, near the wood, there is a barley field; after to-morrow you may cultivate it. I give it to you."

The peasant stammered her thanks and hastened down the path, which was lined on either side with a thicket of alder trees. Casting her eyes around to see if the steward had reached the town, and seeing him disappear behind the corner of the wood, she hastily retraced her steps to the castle.

She was frightened and sad; her heart beat furiously. What had she done? Reduced by necessity to use extreme measures, she had hoped to save her friend by a lie; and now this lie would tell against her, be a terrible blow and banish her from Orsdael. Whilst walking, she tortured herself to know in what way she could repair the evil she had done. There remained only this hope, that she could persuade Martha to play out this comedy with the steward. Catherine well knew that her friend would recoil from this suggestion with horror; moreover, when he declared himself, her hatred would be increased; but what could she do against such a chain of circumstances? And then Martha had undertaken a legitimate warfare against the torturers of her child. Why should she recoil, when the deliverance of her poor Laura would be the price of this new sacrifice?

Catharine soon reached the meadow from

whence she could see the towers of Orsdael, and from her elevation she looked attentively on all sides. Suddenly, she uttered a cry of joy and surprise upon seeing the governess seated with Helen on a bench at the end of the garden, behind the castle. They were entirely alone, no one near but the gardener, who was working at some little distance.

The peasant drew back a step, seemed indifferent; then advancing slowly as if she were taking a walk, she made a sign to the governess.

The latter, surprised at her singular gestures, arose and said to the young girl, "Helen, remain here. Catharine has something of importance to say to me. Act as if you saw nothing."

"Rest assured, good Martha," replied the young girl, "I will not move."

The peasant came up the path and silently approached the widow, who had stepped aside and seated herself on a bench, with her back turned to the castle.

"Sit beside me Catharine," said she, "and speak low, for there are many spies about. What is the matter with you?—there are tears in your eyes."

"Yes, my heart is oppressed. You must submit to a great trial, Martha and I tremble lest your strength will fail you."

"What new suffering is imposed? It is nothing however: my courage will not fail me."

Catharine sadly shook her head.

"Fatal illusion;" she sighed. "You are so happy passing loving moments with your child, that you no longer make an effort to deliver her from her sad captivity. Your weakness and imprudence will be the cause of great unhappiness."

"Catherine, your reproach is unjust! Scarcely a moment passes in which I have not before my eyes the sacred trust proposed to me."

"That may be, but for some weeks you have refused to make the sacrifices necessary to attain it. You have treated Mr. Matthew so haughtily that he has told me to-morrow he will send you from the castle."

"Heavens!" cried the widow in a smothered voice. "To be separated from my child, perhaps forever. And I know not what to do, unless there be some means to make them realize my natural rights."

"Be quiet Martha, everything depends on your will and strength of character. You have the choice—you yourself are called upon to pronounce your sentence. If you can understand how far it is necessary for a mother to sacrifice herself to her child's happiness, the infallible means is offered you. If you hesitate, if the necessary resolution fails you, to-morrow you will be far from Orsdael, and your Laura will remain the daughter and victim of Madame de Bruinsteen, until a premature death, or weak mind crowns the wickedness of her tormentors."

"In mercy spare me, Catherine. Speak plainly. Why put me through this torture?"

"It is necessary, Martha. You should understand that the least weakness could become a crime, and that your reply would decide a supreme moment in the life of your child, and your own happiness."

Taking her friend's hand, and pressing it with tender compassion, she said :

"Have courage, and listen calmly to me. Mr. Matthew is going to give you a solemn and decisive trial. To-morrow he will propose to you . . . ask you to become his wife. Do not refuse him."

"The wife of Matthew!" cried the widow, becoming deathly pale. "I marry a man so vile and low!"

"You misunderstand me," interrupted the peasant. "I do not mean to say that you should become the wife of this despicable man. Appear to accept his proposition. There are a hundred ways of withdrawing afterwards; you will then have, as the fiancee of Matthew, the right to inquire about his past life, and if you know how to take it, the discovery of the secret cannot escape you. The deliverance of your child will then be the price of your sacrifice: can you not find in your mother's heart the strength necessary to conquer? Let us go, dear Martha; satisfy me; tell me that you will submit with courage to this last proof. You do not reply?"

"Ah! let me weep," said Martha, sighing; "tears will calm my anguish, and relieve my mind."

"For the love of God, Martha, let us not lose time. They may surprise us at any time, and interrupt our conversation. Have pity on your child; her fate is in your hands. Let us decide: will she be free and happy, or condemned to madness or a slow death? Tell me, free me from this anguish that makes me tremble."

Martha replied with a troubled smile, "Let him believe that I will become his wife? Alas, it is well that it is exacted from me. Well! if you believe that a word can save my child, I will promise it. Let us pray, Catherine, that my courage will be as strong as my hatred, my indignation."

"Thanks, thanks; I was wrong to doubt the strength of your will." . . .

"Hush! say no more. I hear something back of the syringa bush," interrupted Martha.

They listened in silence; it was the gardener, who came towards them, a bundle of long branches on his shoulders that struck the leaves as he passed. He passed apparently without noticing them; nevertheless, he gave a sidelong glance at the young girl, and raised his shoulders half in irony, half in compassion, seeing her seated on the bench, her head bent, immovable as an idiot.

"Listen, dear Martha," said Catherine. "You

must listen to the declaration of love from the steward ; he will not fail you in this extremity, he will give you proofs of tenderness. If you repulse him with hauteur, he will conclude that you hate him, and will accomplish his first resolution."

"No, Catherine, I can contain myself sufficiently to make him believe that I listen with gratitude."

"That will not be sufficient. He imagines that you love him."

"The impudent creature!" cried the governess. "Love that monster? Whenever I see him my heart sinks within me."

"I know it; but you must feign to love him. You must tell him frankly you love him. The thought makes you shudder. You are shaking like a reed. Does he then inspire you with such horror."

"An inexpressible horror, Catherine. Judge and decide. Last week he cruelly struck my poor little Laura, so that for several days she bore the mark of it. And I am to tell him I love him ! Who could do such violence to themselves? Ah, yes ! for the happiness of my child I would suffer a thousand cruel deaths; but courage fails me for this self-abasement, for this moral suicide."

"But there is only the choice," said the peasant, "of being sent from Orsdael and leaving your child with her tormentors, or accepting this odious alternative."

The widow endured untold suffering ; her face was deathly pale, she wrung her hands silently, nervous chills shook her whole body.

"What a terrible thought," she murmured. "The most cruel enemy my child has to speak to me of love. I must listen to him . . . and say: 'I love you !' Soil my lips with such words !"

After a long silence, and her emotion was somewhat calmed, Catherine said :

"My dear Martha, it is a decisive combat, and you should calculate the chances with coolness—as a soldier who sees either victory or death before his eyes. Perhaps the effort will not be so great. I have begged Matthew to be prudent; perhaps he will content himself with some ambiguous words. Let us hope that he will not overstep the limit; but, should he do so, do not forget that you will repent forever, should you by your weakness condemn your child to slavery and despair. I have compassion on your sad fate; I would thank God, could I suffer in your place; but . . . "

At this moment, a window in the castle was violently opened, and an angry voice called the governess by name.

"It is the Countess!" cried the frightened Martha. "I have forgotten the hour. We should return . . . Keep at a distance, Catherine. Ah! how I will be scolded and insulted!"

The peasant said in leaving:

"Cost what it will, Martha, I must speak to

you again to-day, to prepare you for your great trial. I also have undertaken a warfare against the tormentors of your child."

The widow murmured in approaching her daughter: "Follow me, Helen, the Countess . . . your mother has called us."

The young girl hastened silently by the side of her governess, until they were out of sight of the window. Then she asked in an almost unintelligible voice. "Martha, what did you say to Catharine? Your cheeks are pale, you are grieved—is it not so?"

"It is nothing," stammered the widow; "sad news, my emotion will pass away."

"I have not much confidence in Catharine. She is kind to you, but she is always smiling and chatting with the steward. She is perhaps a wicked woman."

"A wicked woman?" repeated the widow. "She is good and self-denying. She loves you as if you were her own child."

"You have suddenly changed her by an effect of your great power. Formerly she came frequently to the castle; many times she heard the cruel injuries with which I was overwhelmed, and never even a sign of compassion changed her countenance."

"Helen, Helen! you are unjust without knowing it. This woman would give her life to see you happy. Some day all this will be explained to you . . . Be silent now, there is the gardener; perhaps he can hear us."

## CHAPTER II.

THE governess was sitting in her room, with bowed head and closed eyes; every few moments she sighed deeply. At last raising her head slowly and looking around her, a sad smile appeared on her lips, the expression of her face was a mixture of suffering, resignation and contempt.

After a while her thoughts wandered in another direction, she put her hand in her bosom, and drawing out a gold locket opened it.

She looked at the portrait for some time with a kind of fear. In Martha's present mood it seemed to her that the soldier's eyes became lifelike and looked at her in a reproachful manner. This thought made such an impression on her that she instinctively felt the face to be that of a terrible accuser; again looking at it, she said in a trembling voice:

"Ah! my Hector, how severe you look! No, no, have no fear of my courage; I will fulfil the mission with which you charged me, on your death-bed. If I have hesitated at this supreme moment, it was for love of you, it was to protect the heart which on this side of the grave continues to love you, even against the proba-

bility of a crime. Now the struggle is over: The mother has triumphed over the wife, she will empty the chalice to its dregs. Ah, it is a horrible martyrdom! to thus descend to this abyss of self-abasement: but to deliver our child, the pledge of our love."

She stood up as if she had been struck a blow, and listened, growing paler . . . thinking she had heard a voice in the corridor. She was unable to move until convinced of her error; but a cry of agony escaped her and caused her to tremble and cry in a stifled voice:

"Courage! Will! and already I tremble and turn pale at the fear alone of his appearance."

She let herself fall in a chair. Without doubt renewed strength had entered her heart, for a smile of defiance slowly curved her lips and a flash of courage lighted her eyes.

She arose and went into an inner chamber, placed herself before the blinds, and looked across the square, where the young girl was sitting in a corner studying her lessons.

Martha remained quiet so as not to attract her attention. She fixed her eyes on her child, to draw in this long and loving look the strength to undergo this dreaded trial.

At this moment, she distinctly heard a door open. A faint pallor overspread her cheeks. When she returned to her room her bosom heaved and her breathing became oppressed. But this emotion seemed to be more a sign of

strong will and courage than of fear. After giving a last supplicating look towards Heaven, she seated herself by the table, picked up her work with an affectation of indifference, and awaited the arrival of Matthew.

The steward entered the room and made a few pleasant remarks. Although it was only the middle of the week, he had on his best clothes, and in order to be in keeping with the circumstances had put on white gloves. His appearance in this solemn costume had at first caused Martha to tremble, but influenced by necessity she arose smiling and replied to his salutations with gentle grace.

This amicable reception encouraged the steward. Approaching her, his countenance began to brighten, and he said gayly:

"My dear Martha, you are no doubt astonished to see me in this costume? For a long time I have had a heavy heart. Separated by a sad misunderstanding, a grief that we dared not declare has caused both of us suffering; but I come to break the ice . . . Man is weak . . . be not angry . . . it is not my fault Martha, if you are beautiful, and if I am not insensible"—

The steward had thought that it would not be difficult to make his request. After all that Catherine had told him, he was convinced that the governess would receive his offer, if not with enthusiasm, at least with sincerity. Nevertheless his familiar air and clever words

had frightened Martha; although at her command a smile appeared on her lips, there was at the same time a look of severity that intimidated the steward. He knew not what to say and stammered:

"I do not know . . . but . . . it is strange . . . when one's heart is affected . . . their ideas are confused . . . It seems a simple and easy matter . . . but, then . . . either at forty or twenty, love is but love. I came to speak to you of something which without doubt should be agreeable to you, and I know not how to commence."

"You are wrong, sir," replied the Governess in a sweet voice. "Speak; whatever you have to tell me, I will listen to with attention. Will you take a chair?"

"Yes, that would be better," replied Matthew, somewhat amazed. "You seem troubled. It is the fear that the Countess will surprise us, is it not? Do not worry, I have sent her on a trivial pretext to the large farm. She will be away at least an hour. "You see we are no longer children, Martha. Can I speak to you frankly?"

"Yes, speak freely, sir."

"But it is not as the steward, nor as master, that I would speak to you: it is as a friend."

"You are too kind, sir."

"Well, that is not a bad commencement," said Matthew, rubbing his hands. "We will

understand each other from the beginning, Martha. Listen! No doubt you have long since remarked how from the first day of your arrival at Orsdael, I have always been friendly; how I have protected you against the cruelty and hatred of the Countess; how I followed you, to have the happiness of meeting and speaking to you. Can you not guess the cause of this attention?"

"I believe I have already guessed it, sir. It frightened me; for I am only a servant."

"A servant! But you have beauty, you have the eyes of a queen. From the first time that I saw you, Martha, I was struck by your personal charms, by your conversation, by your enticing smile. . . Do not tremble so, my friend; my intentions are pure and honest. I know that where modesty is concerned you are stern and severe. This reserve deceived me at first in making me believe that you despised me; but I attach a high price to virtue, above all in you, dear Martha. It seems sufficient to tell that I love you; you have known it a long time. Nevertheless you do not yet know the depth of my affection. Night and day I think of you; your image is always before me; my dearest dream is to make you my companion through life and never to be separated from you, my dear Martha."

While pronouncing these passionate words, Matthew had taken the widow's hand. She was

pale, and notwithstanding the great effort she made, she could not conceal her emotion, or that she was trembling. Happily, Matthew was mistaken as to the cause of her trouble.

"Pardon me, Martha," he said in a calm voice; "pardon my excited words, I pray you. Before making a formal declaration of the object of my visit, tell me that you are not altogether indifferent to my love. I know that you have a tender and grateful heart; but it would sound so sweet to hear one flattering word from your cherished lips."

"What is it you ask of me, sir?" stammered the widow, nearly giving way to her feelings.  
"What answer do you wish me to give?"

"One word; only 'yes,' low and sweet. Martha, Martha, do you love me?"

The governess silently bowed her head, a deep red color overspreading her forehead and cheeks. She was suffering horribly, and fought with despair against the shame which wounded her heart.

Matthew looked at her with an expression of triumphant joy. He was already quite old, and wished to obtain for his wife a beautiful woman, sweet and blushing like a young girl at the least word that would shock her modesty. He respected her silence for a moment, then asked:

"You have nothing to say to me, Martha? You refuse me the answer which will render me happy?"

"A woman . . . my position towards you . . . you wish to draw this confession from me?"

"I pray you, Martha."

"Ah well, yes," said the governess in a voice almost unintelligible.

Matthew opened his arms and uttered a cry of joy; but the widow bounded from her chair, drew back, and with a look of indignation and fear she cried:

"Oh! sir, spare my dignity as a woman. Do you wish to make me believe that you really love me? Respect at least your love for me."

"You are right, Martha; happiness has made me forget myself;" murmured the steward, overcome and almost disconcerted. "Let us sit down, and listen to me. You are wrong to be frightened at the first expressions of my sincere love, and you must confess it. You see, my dear, for the past fifteen years I have been steward for the Countess of Bruinsteen. I have made money, and have few expenses. I possess means to render the wife whom I choose independent and happy. My heart is young, my health is good, and I am still quite vigorous. Your sweet words, kind manner, a something inexplicable, a mysterious charm in your eyes . . . Ah! ah! see how I talk . . . you certainly have a suspicion of what I wish to say to you, Martha. You consent with joy, do you not? This hesitation . . . you do not yet understand me."

"I dare not understand you, Sir," said the

governess. Such a favor, such an honor for a poor servant!"

"You understand me, Martha? Well! I will speak more clearly. Will you become my wife and share my fortune? Give me your hand, and all will be said."

Martha put her hand in his.

"You are touched, you tremble;" cried Matthew joyfully. "It is but natural: I tremble with joy myself. Be calm now, Martha; the matter is settled. Do not thank me, my dear; if I offer you an independent life, free from all care, you will give me in return all that a man could desire for his happiness. We are then quits. We will not wait long. Some will attempt to prevent our marriage; it is useless for them to try to raise objections."

"Yes, the Countess!" said the governess with a sigh. "As soon as she learns what you have said to me to-day, she will dismiss me."

"Dismiss you?" cried the steward with a defiant air. "The Countess will be furious, and will probably abuse you; but fear not, no matter what she may say or do, she will yield to my will. I possess infallible means to bring her to terms."

A spark of hope shone in Martha's eyes; she raised her head, giving to her face a serious expression, and said:

"Pardon me, sir, but I believe, without being indiscreet, that I have in the past few minutes

acquired the right to question you about certain things that inspire me with distrust, and worry me."

"Certainly, Martha, you have all the privileges of a betrothed."

"Well, sir, show me that you are sincere. For a long time I have wondered why the Countess follows and watches you. Why does your friendship for me inspire her with jealousy, and put her in such a temper . . . ?"

"Nonsense! it is simply because she hates me, and does not like her servants to have more respect and affection for me than for her."

"I believe it . . . Could you deceive me?"

"What an idea, Martha!"

"Well, if there were only appearances, I should do wrong to be uneasy, but there is another mystery that frightens me; in spite of your position as steward of the castle, you are, nevertheless, in the service of the Countess; she has a right to your obedience. How is it, then, when it is necessary, she is under your power, and will bend to your will, as you say?"

Matthew seemed confused at this question, and stammered a reply. This hesitation made Martha tremble with hope and joy. She replied with assumed sadness:

"The cause of your influence over the Countess is then of such a nature that the woman to whom you have offered your heart cannot know it; and this secret, if I discover it, would it not

induce me to refuse your proposal? For alas! in spite of myself, I am obliged to suspect your sincerity!"

"No, my dear Martha, you are wrong. The business of which you speak cannot in any manner influence our affection, or affect my loyalty."

"Why do you conceal from me this reason with so much care?"

"There are things that one cannot say," murmured Matthew; "above all, when it is without interest . . . Why desire to know it?"

"It is then a secret?" cried the governess. "A secret between us already!"

"Well, yes, it is a secret," he replied. "My happiness, and in consequence yours, hangs upon the slightest indiscretion."

"Oh, satisfy me, banish this doubt from my mind; give me this proof of love."

"No, Martha, no one but my wife can have the same interest as I in keeping this secret."

The widow clasped her hands, sighed, and with a pathetic look, said:

"Matthew, Matthew, I beg, I supplicate you."

"The day of our marriage you will know the secret; not before. I must remain inflexible, although when under the influence of your look I lose confidence in myself. But, what do I hear? That voice below? It is the Countess? She has returned in haste, furious no doubt that

I have deceived her! Let us go. I leave you, Martha. When her anger has passed I will announce to her our approaching marriage. You tremble anew. Calm yourself. If madame questions you, say that I have scolded you. That will satisfy her. Good bye! the Countess shrieks as if she were possessed; she is looking for me. We will speak later of the means to hasten our marriage."

Martha arose, and followed him to the door. A sudden fancy seizing the steward, he turned and took Martha in his arms. The governess jumped back and uttered a cry. Matthew left the room overcome with laughter.

The widow fell on a chair completely overcome with grief and shame. At times she would raise her eyes towards heaven, but she was not left long to relieve her bursting heart. The Countess rudely entered the room, calling,

"Where is the steward? I ask you, where is the steward? Do you not hear me, impertinent minx."

"He was here but a moment ago, madame."

"Where has he gone?"

"I do not know, madame."

"Ah! what do these tears mean?"

"He scolded me, madame."

"He scolded you, and that is why you weep," murmured the Countess, reassured. "He has perhaps insulted you?"

"He has said words that grieved me much."

"He is a false and cruel man, is he not?"

"Yes, madame, a false and cruel man."

"Bah! pay no attention to his brutal manner. I am going to reprimand him, the impertinent fellow . . . making me ridiculous by sending me to the large farm on a fruitless errand! . . . Let us go, Martha; console yourself; much better he should ill treat you than to deceive you by a false friendship. Dry your tears and go walk in the garden."

"Madame," said the governess, whose attention was awakened by her last words, "I would like very much to see Catherine, the wife of the gamekeeper. It would be great consolation in my unhappiness."

"There is no reason to refuse your request, but I would prefer that you would remain in the garden longer with Helen. I was much disappointed yesterday to be obliged to call you, as night was falling. Well, take Helen to the keeper's with you. Catherine is a prudent woman. Throw this folly aside, and when you have talked a little while with Catherine, return to the garden; but do not lose sight of Helen for a moment."

"Not a moment, madame."

"So you do not know where the steward is?"

"No, madame; he rushed away as soon as he heard your voice below."

"The coward! He has hidden himself, no doubt, but I will find him. I will know why he ridiculed me."

With these words she left the room, grumbling to herself.

This conversation enabled the widow to subdue the beating of her heart. She was anxious to speak to Catherine; she wished to avoid, as long as possible, an interview with the steward. She reflected a moment, dried her eyes, and opened the door of Helen's room.

"My child," she said, "put aside your book; we will take a walk. Your mother has given us permission to make Catherine a visit."

The young girl rose quickly and clapped her hands in delight; but suddenly she became quiet and asked with anxiety, whilst looking at the governess:

"Martha, what is the matter with you? What has happened to you? Your eyes are red. Alas! you have been crying."

"It is nothing, my dear Helen. The steward has grieved me."

"Oh, my God, could he abuse you as he does me?"

"No, no; words, only words . . . You are unnecessarily frightened. Be quick, put on your neckerchief. The weather is beautiful."

The young girl was in the habit of obeying without replying, so when the governess expressed a desire not to be questioned she was silent, convinced that Martha concealed many secrets; but she believed at the same time that on them depended the stay of her protectress at

Orsdael. She prepared in silence to follow her governess. Reaching the castle gate, she attempted by bright words to console Martha; finally, seeing her absorbed in deep thought, she walked silently by her side. The keeper's house was open, but no one was there. After searching for some time they saw Catherine working in the garden, tearing up the weeds. As soon as the peasant saw the young girl and her governess, she rose and ran to meet them. She tried to satisfy her curiosity by looking hard at the governess. After politely bowing to the young girl, she turned toward her friend and said in a low voice:

"Your coming to me tells me that Matthew has spoken to you. Well, how has it passed? Will you remain at Orsdael?" Martha made her understand that she could not speak of such things before the young girl. She cast her eyes around the garden. It was surrounded by a high wall, covered with ivy and honeysuckle. She could see an opening in the wall, but it was near the house, and one seated in the arbor could not be seen from the outside.

"Go Helen, sit down on the bench in the arbor," said the governess, "I must go for a moment with Catherine to speak on a matter of importance. Wait; in my work-bag you will find my knitting. Have patience for a little while, and I will return."

She went into the house with Catherine, whose heart beat with curiosity.

The young girl walked slowly up the path, gathered flowers here and there, making a bouquet, which she placed in her bosom. Then seating herself on the bench, she continued knitting something commenced by Martha. Whilst her hands quickly worked the needles, she looked dreamily before her, forgetting what she was doing. The governess remained much longer than she had said; but Helen seemed not to notice her absence. Perhaps she was thinking of the traces of tears she had seen in Martha's eyes; perhaps she wondered what could be the mystery with which she was surrounded. Perhaps also a cherished image appeared before her eyes, for occasionally a sweet smile parted her lips. Let it be what it would, her thoughts became so absorbing that she ceased knitting, let her head fall on her breast, and with closed eyes thought deeply.

Whilst she was so deep in thought, a man came up the path to the opening in the wall, stopped, and cast an indifferent glance around the garden. He was a young man, handsome, and dressed with care. He continued his walk, when perceiving from afar the young girl motionless and with bowed head a stifled cry escaped him. He glided along the wall on tip-toe and approached her. Five or six steps from her he put his finger on his mouth and whispered:

“Helen, dear Helen.”

The young girl rose trembling, ready to utter

a cry of terror; but the sign that he made, and the pleading look in his eyes, arrested the cry on her lips.

"Silence, I beg you! Do not deprive me of this moment of happiness," he murmured.

"Frederick, Frederick! go away, leave this place."

"No, no! it is necessary that I have a few words with you, cost what it will."

"Alas!" sighed the girl with tears in her eyes, "my mother has driven Rosalie away because you have spoken to me. If Martha, my good friend, is sent away, I shall die of grief."

"It is not the same thing; besides, fate ordains it. This is not the time to hesitate. Now, my dear, quiet yourself; let us sit on this bench, they cannot see us."

He took her hand and led her to the bench in spite of her supplications and resistance. Finally, seating himself beside her, he said:

"Helen, I was ill at Brussels, quite ill; be quiet, do not tremble so."

"Ill," repeated the young girl; "oh! that is why my heart was filled with grief, and why I wept when I thought of you."

"Thanks, Helen, for your faithful remembrance. So you have not forgotten me?"

"Forgotten, Frederick. . You and Martha are the only creatures in the world who love me."

The young man shook his head, and said quickly:

"We have no time to exchange sweet words. Tell me, Helen, where is your governess from?"

"From Brussels, Frederick."

"What is her family name?"

"She calls herself Martha—Martha Sweerts."

"Who is she?"

"I do not know."

"Was she not related to the Count, your deceased father?—a cousin or an aunt of yours?"

"No."

"Was she not sent by some one of your family to protect you?"

"I do not think so."

"You do not know, you do not think it;" murmured Frederick. "Her presence here hides a secret."

"Yes, yes, many secrets; but do not attempt to penetrate them, Frederick. My happiness, perhaps, depends on it."

"Your happiness? But are you sure this woman is sincere?"

"Oh, my friend! this doubt is a serious injustice, even to suspect her. She is an angel of compassion and generosity."

"It is then true? Indeed, Helen, she must belong to your father's family, for blood alone could inspire the words and sentiments to which she gave expression before me. If I did not know you to be Madame de Bruinsteen's daughter, I would certainly think Martha your mother."

"Yes, yes," cried the girl with proud delight, "she is my mother in heart and soul! Ah! Frederick, would it not be easy to be happy could one have a mother like Martha?"

"Has she never told you why she loves you so passionately, or who has sent her to protect and console you?"

"Ah! Frederick, she tells me strange things. Do you know who has sent her to me? A man who has been for the past twenty years a hero; an officer of the hussars, with the decoration of the Legion of Honor."

"An officer of hussars?" cried the young man.

"Yes, a lieutenant of hussars, who loved me before I was born."

"Ah! that is the secret. Continue, Helen."

"Well, it is he who has sent her to me, and when Martha prays for me he frequently appears and tells her to love me always. It is strange; I do not understand it; but rest assured it is true, for Martha has said it, and what Martha says"—

A rude burst of laughter interrupted her; she saw in the opening in the wall a man who shook his fist, crying with all the strength of his lungs:

"Ah, ah, coquette, you are still there! I will run find the Countess to tell her all that has passed here. It will be bad for you this time, will it not?"

Helen rose quickly, completely overcome by this threat, and rushed towards the house uttering piercing cries. Frederick attempted to quiet

her, but seeing she could no longer listen to him, he went through the opening and disappeared behind the wall.

"What is the matter? What has happened?" cried the widow and the peasant simultaneously, rushing into the garden. "Who spoke of the Countess in so loud and threatening a manner?"

"Ah! Martha, dear Martha, forgive me!" begged the frightened girl, throwing her arms around the neck of her governess, crying bitterly. "I am guilty. I have done wrong. You will be sent away from Orsdael, and I will die of grief."

"No, no; do not be so distressed, my dear Helen," said the widow, caressing her, "speak, tell me what has happened."

"Frederick, Frederick was in the garden . . ."

"O my God! Frederick in the garden with you," cried the two women.

"Yes, and I wanted to call you, but he would not allow me . . . I have no strength—his eyes, the sound of his voice . . . Whilst I listened to him, in guilty forgetfulness of myself, the gardener appeared one side of the wall. He had seen Frederick, and ran to the castle to inform my mother. Alas! alas! Good Martha, what I suffer is nothing. I deserve it; but you? Help me, I feel faint; my strength seems to be leaving me."

The governess pressed the girl to her heart, embraced her tenderly, whispering in her ear a thousand consoling words.

"Come, my child," said the widow, taking her by the arm ; "we cannot remain here. Your mother will be still more indignant if we do not return immediately."

Before leaving the gamekeeper's house, Catherine took Martha's hand, and looking in her eyes, said :

"Martha, you are indeed the daughter of a soldier. I can see what is passing in your heart, and I admire your courage. Mr. Matthew will protect you both from the cruelty of the Countess. Find him immediately, call him to your aid; he will be your defender."

When the widow and young girl reached the road leading to the castle, they quickened their steps, but exchanged few words. Helen entreated her governess to forgive her selfish carelessness, and lamented, in anticipation, the loss of her generous protectress. Martha, although half-dead with anxiety, tried to hide her feelings, to spare the distress of her child, and give her courage to accept the cruel punishment which without doubt awaited her.

They saw the old cook, who ran towards them with the gardener. The latter, when he had joined them, said to Martha in a rude, coarse manner :

"Madam, give the key of the upper room to Marion. The Countess wishes it. Do not oppose her orders, or I will use violence to take the keys. You can no longer go up there."

"It is true, Martha," added the cook in a low voice; "You must leave Miss Helen with me. The countess is waiting for you in the drawing-room."

"The keys!" murmured Martha, with dread. "And Helen, what will she do? Oh, heavens!"

"Oh! she will be severely punished for her imprudence," sighed Marion. "She is guilty, nevertheless. I pity her."

"She will abuse her?"

The cook made a sign in the affirmative, and seeing Martha grow pale and tremble, she whispered :

"Do not be so worried; I will try to remain with Miss Helen until this storm blows over."

"The steward! Where is the steward, Marion?" cried Martha.

"He is not in the castle. I believe he is in the woods near the woodcutter's. Run quickly to the Countess, Martha; it cannot be as terrible as you think."

"Have courage, Helen; do not weep any more. I alone am the cause of it all, and I alone must suffer for my imprudence."

"Oh, no, no," cried Helen; "you are innocent; I will tell my mother. If she wishes to punish any one for what has happened, I am the one to suffer. Oh, I beg you, Martha, do not render me doubly unhappy."

But a severe look and an imperious gesture made her understand that she must submit

without replying. She became silent, and bowed her head.

The governess gave the keys to Marion, looked anxiously at her daughter, and ran, trembling, into the castle.

## CHAPTER III.

BEFORE entering the drawing-room, Martha hesitated a moment, finally summoned courage, and knocked gently at the door.

"Come in," cried a brusque voice.

Madame de Bruinsteen was seated in an arm-chair. Her eyes flashed, there was a sarcastic and triumphant smile on her lips. She was delighted because this unexpected event had given her an opportunity to vent her rage on the woman she hated. On entering the room the widow murmured a few words of apology; but the Countess did not give her time to speak plainly, and said in an ironical tone:

"Ah! ah! you are here? Well, cowardly hypocrite, how much money did Frederick give you to deceive me? How many falsehoods did he tell? Madame is well informed and cautious; one must weigh their words with her—she is so sensible! . . . And that miserable thief sold the honor of my house for money! Yes, yes, do you still dare to excuse yourself? You have assurance enough, but now you are caught in your own trap. Nothing can save you. If I do not take care I will crush you under my feet, viper that you are! but I wish

to contain myself. I am anxious to know what ridiculous means you have employed to escape the punishment of your cowardly act. Speak, and be quick, for it is now useless ; in a few moments your fate will be decided."

Martha joined her hands and said in a pleading voice, while great tears coursed down her cheeks:

"Oh! madame, I understand your anger—it is just; but let me explain to you how this misfortune happened. Perhaps you will see some reason why you should not be so inexorable towards your poor servant."

"Not so much preamble, if you please."

"With your permission I took Helen to the game-keeper's with me. Catherine was in the garden, so I made Helen sit in the arbor whilst I went into the house to speak with my friend. During my absence Mr. Bergmans crept into the garden through an opening in the wall and talked with Helen . . ."

"And you did not know he was there?" interrupted the Countess.

"Believe me, madame, I was completely ignorant of his presence at Orsdael."

"There! I now recall your anxiety to go to the gamekeeper's; you were so deceitful as to choose your usual hour of walking with Helen, in fact, to drag from me permission to go; you seated Helen in the garden, where she could talk freely with her lover. He came . . . And this

clever scheme you would make me believe is a chance meeting? You have, indeed, a poor opinion of my wit, if you hope to deceive me by such petty subterfuges."

"I am innocent, madame, I swear it!"

The Countess burst out laughing.

"An oath!" she cried, "what does that signify from the mouth of a shameless traitress? Did I not give orders that Helen should not be out of your sight for a moment?"

"Indeed yes, madame," sighed the poor woman, "in that I disobeyed your orders. For that I repent most bitterly; it is the only fault with which I reproach myself; and for that, on bended knee, I beg your forgiveness."

"Forgiveness? We will see! Did he remain long with Helen?"

"Two or three minutes, madame."

"So long! And what did he say to her?"

"I do not know."

"Did she not call you?"

"I believe so, madame, but I did not hear her."

"Hypocrite! Not hear ten steps away? It was all arranged to deceive me. Although you seem sad and frightened, you are inwardly content. The money that Frederick has given you no doubt will indemnify you for your vile treachery. Go out of my sight, leave the castle! wait at the door, I will send your luggage. Beg and pray as you will, you can never again be admitted."

"Oh! madame, do not be so unrelenting towards me," cried Martha trembling, with anxiety. "You will send me away. Where will I go? Have compassion on a poor widow. You believe that I would sell myself and expose myself to your just anger? Ah! if you could but know that I would give half my life to remain in your employ."

The Countess appeared not to hear, and rising with renewed fury, said:

"So much for stupidity and folly; this hour will be the reckoning. I will try to see that she does not forget to-day. Yes, henceforth I wish that only hearing my name will cause her to fear and tremble."

These words drew from Martha a distressful cry. She threw herself at the feet of the Countess, embraced her knees, and had recourse to the most pitiful supplications to soften her anger; but Madame Bruinsteen only looked at her with a triumphant smile on her lips; she rudely repulsed her, and in pointing to the door, cried:

"Go back, go back! no mercy! You have been here long enough with the steward to provoke and defy me. Now you are lost. Matthew himself, if he were here, would send you from the castle; enough cowardice and useless lies. Leave me, I say! Shall I call the servants to rid me of you and your hypocritical prayers?"

But the widow dragged herself after her, beseeching in the most despairing manner. Her

words only redoubled the fury and indignation of the Countess.

"What!" she cried, "have I understood you? Mercy?—you ask mercy for the idiot? You have then an affection for her? You are frightened at the thought that she will suffer the just punishment of her wickedness?"

"Oh! no, no, madame! Mercy, mercy for myself."

"Stop there!" shouted Madame de Bruinsteen, "you have uttered your last word at Orsdael. Go; will you leave or not?"

And as Martha remained on her knees weeping, she caught her by the arm and thrust her violently from her, giving her a blow so severe that poor Martha hurt herself against the wall, and for a moment was stunned.

The door of the chamber was opened, and a cruel invective recalled the widow to the consciousness of her position.

"Well!" cried the Countess. "you wish that I should absolutely throw you out the door?"

Martha staggered towards the door and left the house, bruised, annihilated, and almost without an idea. The scene poor Helen would have to undergo came before her mind, at which she was so overcome that she became almost paralyzed. Hearing her name called, she raised her head and uttered a cry of joy. She extended her hands to the steward, who ran towards her with signs of impatience and anger.

"I know what has happened: Catherine has told me all. But what did the Countess say? You weep! Has she abused you?"

"Cruelly abused me; she has driven me from the house, I cannot go up stairs for my luggage."

"She is foolish, Martha. Is it your fault if this rascal Frederick sees fit to suddenly appear. Let us go—ignore the injustice of the Countess, and return to your room."

"I dare not," she said with fear. "She would have me thrown from the door by the servants."

Matthew dragged her by the hands, saying with great agitation:

"Send you from the door? Well; we will see if she dare lay her hand on you! She took this pretext to send you away. It is not against you, but she is taking her revenge on me. She knows in ill-treating you she wounds me: but we will see. Do not tremble so. Were she a thousand times more indignant, she will unbend and become gentle as a lamb. Not only will I tell her she must respect you, but at the same time I will tell her that I have chosen you for my wife, and that you will soon become my bride."

"Matthew, Matthew," cried the widow, "do not do that. Her fury will know no limit."

"I know it, but should she become foolish or angry, I possess the means to calm her. Remain on the staircase; I will see her. Have no

fear: should I wish it, she will ask your pardon for her brutality."

"No, no, do not humiliate her; use gentle means; only prove to her my innocence. If she will only forgive my momentary neglect."

"It is my affair, Martha; I shall have my revenge. Remain here and have courage; you will not leave Orsdael."

The steward entered and closed the door. Martha heard his angry voice, and scarcely had he said a few words, when the sharp voice of the Countess mingled with his threats. Sometimes a low sound, sometimes angry threatenings, sometimes even the boards creaked under the shock of a kick.

Martha was all in a tremble on the stairway, her eyes fixed on the door, through which she could hear the angry voices, on one of which depended her own and her child's happiness. With what attention she listened, but not a word could she understand; the noise of the voices, deadened by the heavy door, came to her in an indistinct, confused manner.

The altercation lasted a long time before either Madame de Bruinsteen or Matthew seemed to lose ground. Finally, however, the voice of the steward seemed to predominate; without doubt the obstinacy of the Countess had put him in a fury; for now he talked so loud that Martha could distinguish some of his threats. The words "false mother," "stolen inher-

itance," came to her ear and made her shudder. Her enemies spoke of the secret, for the knowledge of which she would undergo bitter humiliations, cruel suffering! Trembling so that she could scarcely stand, she steadied herself against the wall and crawled near the door. Her heart beat furiously, and she almost gave way under the agony. The voice of the steward kept the same tone, but the countess spoke at the same time, and only a confusion of sounds, without any sense, came to Martha.

She could understand however that they spoke of Helen, of the old count, and his inheritance. Trembling with impatience and hope, she fixed her head against the door, but was disappointed, as the voices grew calm and low . . .

Suddenly, as if the countess had opened a new wound, the steward answered with redoubled fury. Martha bent her head and placed her ear to the keyhole. Here she could understand all that Matthew said.

"Ah, ah!" he sneered, "you would send me away also. Indeed, I have known you for some time, madame, and have taken precautions long since. You have been foolish enough to give me some of your handwriting. This is a sword over your head. You will obey me—you will obey me I say . . . or ruin, misery, perhaps prison, awaits you. I was your accomplice, your instrument, but to avenge myself . . ."

Martha concentrated all her will power to

hear them; she did not breathe: the secret for which she would give her life would probably be revealed to her. But hearing a sound, she rose and recoiled, uttering a stifled cry. The old cook came down the stairway and approached her smiling. Marion had seen her with her ear at the keyhole.

"What are you doing, Martha? Why do you listen in so vexed a manner?" she asked in a low voice. "You are pale; are they talking of you?"

"Yes, yes, of me," said the widow.

"If my presence does not worry you, Martha, you will tell me in a few moments what you have heard, will you not?"

The widow put her ear to the key-hole again, but the quarrel had quieted down; their voices sounded indistinct and low as in an ordinary conversation. After listening for some little time without hearing anything, Martha sighed sadly and left the door. Her eyes were filled with tears, but she overcame her feelings, as the cook was still on the stairway.

"Well," said Marion, "what are they saying about you? Are you to be dismissed, or will you remain?"

"I am dismissed," cried Martha, trembling with emotion, and hardly knowing what the cook had asked her.

"Dismissed," she repeated, "for good and all? Is there no hope? What a great misfor-

tune, Martha ! I am truly sorry for you. Helen told me the whole affair, and you are not at all to blame."

"Helen ?" said Martha. "How is she? Very much grieved, is she not?"

"The poor idiot! Had one the heart of a stone, she would demand their pity."

"Alas! she fears bad treatment."

"No, no, another would fear it—but an idiot! Do you believe she thinks only of herself? All her cry is, 'Martha, Martha!' and nothing excites her so much as the fear that you may suffer for her imprudence. It is singular: she has never shown you much affection. I have always believed that she hated you, and now, when at any moment she may lose you, she shows great love for you. Her brain is troubled, she knows not what she says or does."

They opened the room door, and the steward appeared in the corridor; he was red, and his eyes yet flamed with anger. Marion's presence appeared to annoy him; he made an imperious gesture for her to leave, but changing his mind, turned to her, taking from her hand the keys which she still held, then said to the governess:

"Follow me, Martha."

The widow obeyed. He led her to his own room, offered her a chair near the table, and said to her:

"You see these keys, Martha. The affair is settled, but it has cost much trouble. I have

used the strongest means in order to conquer. You may remain at Orsdael, and have nothing to fear."

"She has forgiven me?" cried the governess.

"Forgiven! A woman like the Countess never forgives."

"But I can, nevertheless, remain?"

"That was not so difficult. Madame de Bruinstein consented to that without much opposition; but when I told her you were to become my wife, I thought she would have an apoplectic fit from temper. . . That astonishes you, Martha? I know what you are thinking—that she is jealous, because I ignore her affections, for another. It is not that; she hates me in an indescribable manner, but she needs and fears me. If I wished, I could do her much harm, even ruin her completely. That is why she wishes to hold me under subjection: but it is over—I am weary of that existence."

"What terrible secrets are there then between you and the Countess?" murmured Martha with unfeigned terror. "Madame has perhaps committed an ill deed, and you know it?"

"Ask me nothing of that," replied Matthew, "the day of our marriage you will know all. Until then you cannot tear from me a single word. You recognize yourself that silence is praiseworthy. Let us talk now of serious matters. The scene that has taken place between the Countess and me will not allow us to wait

long. Our wedding must be hastened as quickly as possible. Madame de Bruinsteen will find means in her machinations to break it off. You will then write this evening to Brussels for the necessary papers, and if you are as anxious as I, we will be married in six weeks."

The widow seemed not to be listening, and her eyes were fixed with peculiar intensity towards the farther end of the room. There was a mahogany writing table between the velvet arm-chair and some other pretty furniture. There were also some paintings in gilt frames, and a large glass. But the object on which Martha's eyes were fixed was a chest bound with iron, which was at the foot of the desk.

"You are distracted, Martha," remarked the steward. "Tell me, my dear, will you write this evening for the necessary papers? Will you do it if possible, so that we will be married in a short time."

"Yes, yes, this evening," repeated Martha, whose attention was irresistibly drawn to the iron-bound chest.

"You are looking at my furniture? Ah! Martha, it will not be necessary for you to buy much for our house. All that you see here belongs to me. A beautiful desk, magnificent arm-chairs, are they not?"

Martha tried to smile, and said with forced gaiety:

"I believe that chest the most valuable piece

of furniture. It is there without doubt you keep all your savings."

"Yes; and other papers."

"Papers? Valuable papers?"

"With what a strange air you ask that," said Matthew, hesitating. "You understand; it is in such a chest that one locks what he wishes to keep."

"Indeed, Mr. Matthew, there is nothing that excites a woman's curiosity more than an iron-bound chest, one which seems to contain mysterious things. In several weeks I will be your bride. Well, now be good, and tell me everything that is in the chest."

"Go! go! foolish one, you are joking. What is there? A little money, titles for public deeds; and you may well imagine I am not stupid enough to treasure up these things without gaining any benefit from them. When we return from church husband and wife I will give you the keys of the chest and closets. Until then, my dear, you must overcome your curiosity, for all is well locked. Let us go, and forget these whims; time is too precious to lose. Listen, Martha; once married, we can remain at the castle, or if you prefer to have a house of your own, you can have your choice. There is much to be gained here; one can live without much expense, and quietly let their fortune accumulate."

"I prefer to remain at Orsdael," said Martha, who was thinking of her daughter.

"That is a sensible decision," replied the steward, "inasmuch as you will be neither servant nor governess, and will have no one to serve."

"And the young girl, who will take care of her?"

"They have arranged that, Martha. In a few days she will be far away from the castle, and I have reason to think she will never return."

"What do you mean?" asked Martha, seized with a sudden anxiety.

"It is decided; the young lady goes to a convent."

"To a convent?"

"This seems to trouble you; you think, perhaps, when Helen leaves, the Countess will send you away also. Your services will no longer be of use to her."

"Yes, Matthew, indeed this news makes me tremble."

"You are wrong. This decision was made at my request, to put an end to this constant quarreling."

"But into what convent will she go?"

"I do not know yet. The Countess is looking for one."

"Do they wish to make a religious of Helen? It is impossible—an idiot!"

"No; she will be at boarding-school until they decide what to do with her . . . I hear the Countess scolding; she will vent her rage on the servants. I will try to calm her, very gently; at present she will consent to everything. As soon as I learn the news I will tell you. Go to your room, Martha, and rest a few moments."

"Oh! I cannot," answered the governess.

"Why? what have you to fear now?"

"The Countess; she will abuse me."

"No, no; I have looked out for that. She promised not to speak of what had passed. If she should say a few disagreeable words, act as if you had not heard; but do not be frightened, she will not trouble you."

"She is coming now. Alas! I tremble at the thought of seeing her."

"What is she coming for?"

"To scold and punish the young girl."

"Indeed--but what is that to you? Let her inflict what punishment she wishes on the idiot; she deserves it, for telling such falsehoods. If I had time I would also like to make her feel she could not ridicule us without being punished for it."

"But, Matthew, can you not understand? I will be near her, and the Countess, in her anger, will be as furious with me as with her. I am worn out with these odious scenes; I am tired of them, and if they are to continue, I would rather leave Orsdael."

"Ah!" said Matthew, "what does this mean? I cannot put a stop to Madame de Bruinsteen's seeing her daughter."

Martha took his hands, and said with extreme sweetness, and in a caressing voice:

"Matthew, dear Matthew, the Countess will give you anything. Give me a new proof of your affection. Make her promise not to see Helen for two or three days at least. Thus I will avoid the danger of being maltreated or abused by her. Matthew, be good; lift this burden from my mind, I pray you!"

The steward, touched by her expression and her accent, lifted his head for a moment, and said smilingly:

"Enchantress that you are! You can do exactly what you wish with me. Go on, calm yourself; I will do as you desire."

"The Countess will not go near Helen?"

"Not for three days, Martha."

"Oh! thank you."

Matthew rose and left the room; at the door he said to the governess, who followed him:

"Rest a little while, Martha; as soon as you feel rested, write and ask for your papers. You know which ones you need; I told you. Do not let these troubles worry you. Our marriage will make you forget your sorrow. Rest assured we will be happy."

The widow watched him, to make sure he would not retrace his steps; as soon as he had

gone down stairs she uttered a suppressed cry, and ran to her room. Before reaching the door she murmured joyously:

"Helen—Laura, my own dear child, I will remain. I will never leave you as long as I live."

## CHAPTER IV.

MISS DE BRUINSTEEN was seated at a table copying in a book. Although she gave her attention to her work, from time to time she turned her head, smiling sadly at her governess, who was seated against the wall, her eyes lowered as though in deep thought. A complete silence reigned in the room; the oblique rays of the sun and the feeble light indicated declining day. Martha was sad and restless; she had not yet told Helen of their resolution to put her in a convent. She feared the news would break her heart. Besides, she still hoped, with Matthew's aid, to avert the fatal blow which menaced them both. In truth, the steward could not understand why she wished to prevent the young girl's departure—in fact, had repulsed her attempt as unreasonable; but there yet remained several days of respite, and she still hoped to bring Matthew to think as she did, without betraying her motive. Unfortunately the steward had unexpectedly left the castle at an early hour that morning, in the large carriage, and would not return until late that evening. Why had not Matthew spoken of this trip? What was he hiding? Reflecting on this, she shuddered and

turned pale, for a terrible suspicion had come to her mind. The convent! If it should be a private asylum! Horror! her child to be enclosed with mad people and condemned to lifelong imprisonment! However, this thought she repulsed with horror. Matthew's words led her to believe her apprehensions were without foundation. Wavering thus between feeble hope and terrible anxiety, poor Martha raised her eyes to heaven, praying the terrible fate which threatened her child might be averted. Helen turned her head and uttered a cry of compassion; she dared not speak, because Martha had begged her to do her work in silence. Nevertheless, as soon as she had finished she rose, offering her writing to her governess, saying:

"See, dear Martha, I have finished."

"It is well done, my dear child," she said, looking hurriedly over the paper. "Already you write better than I. Your application exceeds my expectations."

Sitting down the young girl took the hand of her governess, asking in a sweet supplicating voice:

"Martha, you are grieved? Oh! that I had not been so disobedient; you are suffering for my fault, you who are goodness itself—it is as if a knife pierced my heart. Be comforted, Martha; It will never happen again. If Frederick ever comes near me I will call help and fly away from him. I will even use violence to forget everything."

"No, no, you are mistaken; that is not the cause of my sorrow."

"I dare not ask you the cause, you dislike my questioning you. But you grieve me much, Martha. I see from your face you are in trouble. You are allowed to remain with me, above all, my mother has forgiven both of us, you tell me. This unexpected happiness should make you glad; and yet you are pale and overcome with sad thoughts. There, there, my kisses have brought a smile to your lips."

She embraced her governess and pressed her to her heart. Martha patiently submitted to her caresses, kissed her twice on the forehead, and tried to smile. They remained silent a moment, looking affectionately at each other, when a light knock at the door startled them. Martha hastened to see who came thus to call, and returning immediately, said to her:

"Helen, it is Marion, the cook; your mother gave orders she should return immediately with you."

"My mother wishes me?" cried the girl, "O my God, what is going to happen."

The governess was not less frightened, but overcame her fear, and with apparent cheerfulness said :

"Why do you grow so pale, my poor child? I will be with you. Fear nothing, I will be at your side."

"Alas! that is not why I tremble, dear Martha;

it is because you, without being guilty, must suffer. My mother can punish me cruelly, it is nothing; but if she attempts to abuse you in my presence . . . ”

“No, no, you are needlessly frightened; but let us go, your mother will not wait. Be calm and follow me.”

She went down with the young girl and opened the door of the large room. A stifled sigh escaped her. Seated by the side of the Countess was a man clothed in black, whose cold and smiling countenance froze the blood in her veins.

“That will do,” said the Countess “Leave Helen with us; close the door; go up stairs and obey my orders. . . . Do you not understand me?”

The widow left the room, but remained in the corridor. Her limbs refused to move from the spot where an irrevocable decree would decide the fate of her daughter. She feared the Countess would surprise her, and quickly mounting the stairs, she fell on a chair, resting her head in her hands.

Who was this man dressed in black? Probably a physician. Why should he come to Orsdael, when no one was ill? Why should he remain alone with Helen? The private asylum! Indeed, the widow had known for a long time that a single word from a physician sufficed to condemn a person to perpetual seclusion; and

once the poor victim was enclosed in a living tomb, who would dare suggest their release, when even the words and gestures of the most sane would have the appearance of madness?

The widow seemed crushed under the weight of these frightful thoughts, until the sound of the bell warned her to descend. At the foot of the staircase, she saw the stranger enter his carriage. When she went into the room, the Countess said to her in a bright and joyful tone:

"Martha, conduct Helen to her room; close the doors carefully and return quickly. I have something important to tell you."

Helen wept and trembled; she seemed much frightened and began already to explain to Martha the cause of her fear, when the widow made her understand by a look that she must overcome her grief and reserve her confidence until they should be alone. Reaching Helen's room, Martha closed the door and asked:

"Well, my child, what has happened? Speak quickly; your mother is waiting."

"Alas, alas! I am to go to a convent far from here," sobbed the girl. "To leave Orsdael, to fly from my prison, would indeed be a happiness; but to be separated from you Martha,—I will die without you, I cannot live."

"Have courage, Helen," said Martha, overcoming her emotion. "Wherever you are, my child, I will be with you, always and everywhere. What did the stranger say to you? I must know; but hurry, for I hear the bell."

"The stranger took my hand; fixed his twinkling eyes on mine, as if he wished to penetrate to the base of my brain. My heart beat violently, my mind wandered, a mist swam before my eyes."

"But what did he ask you?"

"All sorts of strange and incomprehensible questions, of what I thought or dreamed, if I would like to play with other girls, or if I would not like to become a religious . . ."

"And you replied?"

"I do not know what I stammered. His staring deprived me of thought."

"He was much astonished at your replies, was he not?"

"No, he shook his head with an air of satisfaction, then he went to the table and wrote something on a large sheet of paper."

"O my God!" cried Martha, raising her hands to heaven.

Helen looked at her tremblingly; but the widow avoided an explanation by leaving the room, saying:

"Have no fear, my child. There are secrets that you will know some day. Now you have nothing to fear. I will return in a moment."

"Be seated, Martha," said the Countess, when the former entered the room. "I have good reason to be angry with you; but I wish to forget all that has passed now, especially as the cause of all my grief and anger will leave Ors-

dael. At what I have to say you also will rejoice; good news for both of us! To-morrow Helen will enter a convent; thus you will be free from the care of her, and you can walk and do as you please each day. . . Why, you do not seem satisfied? I thought I was giving you pleasure."

Martha felt that she should make a pretense of delight. She tried to smile in stammering thanks; but in spite of her efforts one could read distress in her face.

"I understand," said the Countess, "you fear you will lose your place after her departure? You are wrong, Martha; I have told Matthew that you can remain at Orsdael until your marriage, or indeed afterwards, if you desire it. Once get Helen out of my sight, in a place of safety, and I will no longer be either grieved or angry. You may keep me company, and I will do everything to make your stay agreeable. My words no doubt astonish you. I am not in the habit of being so gracious. But to-morrow I will have the happiness for which I have sighed so many years—delivery from hard slavery. The idiot was a source of grief, and a weight as heavy as that carried by a galley-slave. I am delivered of these fetters, and breathe freely for the first time. Joy renders me good and amiable."

Martha by this time had gained command over herself. Whilst the Countess talked, she smilingly murmured some words of assent, which

gave her courage to learn that which she wanted to know.

"You are too good, madame, to allow me to remain at Orsdael. Will you also grant me another favor? I am no longer to have charge of Helen? Ah! how thankful that you no longer give me this difficult charge! But if Helen cannot remain at the convent, and if she should return?"

"No, no; she will not return!" cried the Countess. "She goes to a place from which one never returns."

"Oh! that is nothing; Mr. Bergmans will know where she is, and find means for her escape."

"But Frederick does not know it; no one knows it but the steward and myself, where she will be; the windows are barred with iron, so that even a cat could not escape. Ah, ah, why do you try to hide that you are as delighted as I? Listen; I wish to tell you in confidence, but you must speak of it to no one, for every one believes that Helen is entering a convent to become a *religieuse*. In this way they will speak little of her disappearance."

"What! is she not, then, going to a convent?"

"Yes, it is in fact a convent, for it is governed by religious."

Madame de Bruinsteen leaned over and whispered in the widow's ear:

"You saw the stranger, did you not?"

"Yes."

"He is a gentleman who came to examine my daughter's mind. Everything passed off beautifully. Helen seemed more stupid and idiotic than ever. There, he has signed a paper proving that her brain is affected, and . . . you understand?"

"What? what, madame? I do not understand," stammered Martha, almost swooning.

"It is easy to understand; Helen goes into a private asylum."

A piercing shriek escaped the poor widow; but she soon calmed herself, and burst out laughing.

"That cry?" murmured the stupefied Countess.

"It is joy, madame, joy!" cried Martha. "Now I can marry, now you will be happy and free from grief. Ah! now I will feel easy, not so much for myself as for you, my good and generous mistress."

Deceived by the flattering words, the Countess cried joyfully:

"I believe it. Since I am sure of my deliverance my heart is relieved of an enormous weight. I was indeed a martyr to have the care during so many years of an idiot, to whom nature has given a wretched disposition, and who would live but to disgrace my name and render my life wretched."

"Yes, madame, a cruel martyrdom for a mother—obliged, after so much suffering, to see her only child shut up in an asylum."

"What would you do, Martha? There is no other way."

"Will she be far away, madame?"

"Oh, yes; she will be far enough."

"The farther the better for you and . . . and for me. In this way there is less danger of Mr. Bergmans' discovering her retreat. No doubt she will be sent out of the country?"

"Do not ask me that," replied the Countess, evidently dissatisfied by her curiosity. "Matthew went this morning to speak to the directress of the Convent, and to tell her of Helen's coming. If he returns before night you can ask him what you want to know. He will be able to tell you. It is good that I have made him promise faithfully to be silent as to the place where Helen will be placed to-morrow."

"Ah! to-morrow,—so soon!"

"To-morrow at ten precisely, he will come in a carriage for her."

"Will we be long away, madame? You understand it will be necessary for me to have some clothes, at least a change of linen, with me."

"You will remain here with me, Martha."

"And what woman will accompany your daughter?"

"None: Matthew alone. All is decided and

arranged. Besides, it is not far, for Matthew will return the next morning. The sun has already disappeared behind the woods; Martha, return to your room and gather together Helen's linen and clothes. I will send you immediately several trunks and band-boxes. Take this evening to pack, so as not to be hurried to-morrow morning. Be discreet, repeat nothing that you have heard . . . and if the idiot cries, let her cry, and act as if you had not heard her. It is the last time she will torment you."

Martha left the room with a smile and words of thanks on her lips; but as soon as she was sure she was alone, the tears poured from her eyes and she was obliged to sit on the stairs, for her limbs trembled so she could not move. At the first floor she stopped in order to gather her thoughts, to give her courage to warn her daughter of the grief of separation and to console her by a hope.

An implacable fate had followed her since she set foot in Orsdael. She had dissembled, lied, feigned always, as well with her daughter as with her employers.

She remained for some time immovable, absorbed in deep thought. Then suddenly she raised her head. In her black eyes burned a pride and a kind of wicked courage, as if she would defy her invisible enemies. Her features dilated suddenly, and her expression became calm and patient. When she turned her steps

towards Helen's room, a sweet serenity brightened her face, and she said to the disconsolate girl, who fell on her neck weeping bitterly:

"Let us go, Helen, my dear child; do not weep. Your grief is reasonable, but what you fear will never happen!"

"Oh! God be praised!" cried the young girl, with a feverish laugh. "I have reason to hope in your marvelous power. You can persuade my mother. I will not go to a convent? I can remain with you. Oh! thanks, good angel that you are."

"Be seated, Helen," said the widow, handing her a chair, "and try to listen calmly to me. The day is ending, and I have yet work to do, and not much time to talk with you. You will certainly go to a convent."

"Oh! Martha, you see how I tremble!"

"You are wrong. Listen to what I say to you. To-morrow at ten o'clock a carriage will come for you . . . Why are you so restless? There is not the slightest cause. Is life so pleasant and agreeable in this sombre cage?"

"With you, Martha, this dark room is for me a paradise on earth."

"You will assuredly be better in a convent."

"Ah! you will come with me; yes, yes—then I am content. If I could only leave this place now, where I have suffered so much!"

"That is to say, my child, I will perhaps not leave here in the same carriage with you, and

perhaps you will not see me during the trip. You grow pale: try to overcome this useless fright."

"For the love of God, do not deceive me, Martha!"

"When have I deceived you?"

"Never, never! Forgive this doubt. My heart is oppressed, and I can scarcely breathe. All my limbs tremble; something tells me that I am going to lose you forever. Never to see you again, Martha? I would prefer death."

The widow, although her heart bled cruelly, softened her voice, and tried to calm the young girl, assuring her she would never leave her, and that she would always be at her side, to love and protect her. Then, thinking she had succeeded, she added :

"Well, Helen; since this trip can be taken without fear, I hope yet to be able to prevent it. The steward has been away since morning. He will return late this evening. I will watch for him. Through him I can perhaps make your mother change her mind. If this last attempt fail me, show that you have courage, my child, and do not increase my difficulties by your weakness. We will only be separated a short time, after which you will find me more devoted and powerful than ever before. It is possible, Helen, that your enemies hope to make your life miserable in the convent; but understand that I have love and strength, to triumph over their wickedness."

Martha succeeded at last in feigning an absolute confidence, to inspire her child with the necessary strength. Helen promised to take the trip without complaint, assured with the idea that her protectress would be present at her departure to encourage and help her.

It was time for the young girl to retire and try to take some repose, after the terrible blow her heart had received that day. The consoling words of her governess had made her hope that her life would be less bitter at the convent than at Orsdael.

The widow left after tenderly embracing her; scarcely had Martha closed the door than the whole expression of her face changed. Signs of fear reappeared around her lips, her eyes gazed into vacancy in an aimless manner, her own thoughts terrified her—nevertheless this same thought only an instant before had given her the courage to defy her enemies. She seemed to hesitate and to recoil at the execution of it; although the deliverance of her child would be perhaps the price of her audacity. In the twilight everything seemed to be shadowed in grey . . .

Suddenly she uttered a strange cry; her resolution was taken.

“I am a mother; God will forgive me.”

She ran with feverish haste towards the steward’s room, and fell against the door, causing it to open. She jumped towards the iron-bound

chest, looked on all sides for the lock, shook it violently, then trembling and out of breath, she was in despair when she found it could only be opened by violence. In this chest there was a certificate, for which Martha would have given her life's blood. The deliverance of her child, her right as mother, her happiness, was kept from her trembling hands only by the thin partitions of this chest; and she must leave it there, renounce all hope of success, and sink under the weight of her inability! But she persevered, ran to the chimney, picked up the tongs; throwing herself on her knees before the chest, wrenched the instrument between the lid and the lock, leaned on the tongs with such force as to make them bend like a piece of lead. Great drops of perspiration were rolling down her face; she breathed heavily, her heart was beating fiercely. "I can do nothing, nothing at all."

Finally the tongs broke in her last effort, and Martha felt with an inexpressible terror that there was blood on her hands.

She picked up the broken pieces, and ran to her room, where she fell insensible on a chair.

She regained consciousness after some little time. To be sure, she was discouraged; but as soon as her weakness left her and her brain was cleared, she reflected and wondered if in this extreme necessity, there was not some way for her to contrive to battle against her fate.

Should she wake her child, dress her quickly, and fly with her in the darkness? Would they not follow and overtake them? They would throw them in prison . . . and what would be the fate of poor Laura? Should she go to the Countess, tell her name, and claim her right as mother of the girl? But she could not prove this right; her only proof was in the possession of her enemies, and at the least suspicion they would destroy forever this proof. Should she fly alone from the castle? Should she hunt for hours in the woods to beg Frederick's help? Who would show her the way? And after all, what could the young man do? Her unsuccessful meditations made her sigh deeply; the dreadful conviction that the doors of an asylum were to close on her child, broke her heart; she felt chilled. After remaining immovable for some time, a sudden and mysterious inspiration struck her; she held her head up with a joyous expression on her face.

"Yes," she cried, "what I mean, perhaps, would be a crime under other circumstances, but I cannot choose; I must at any price deliver my child!"

## CHAPTER V.

IT was quite eleven o'clock when the steward's carriage drove furiously to the castle door. The horses had been urged on, and were worn out. Matthew jumped quickly down and rang the bell. The door was opened immediately.

"I see a light in Madame's window ; has she not retired ?

"No, sir ; she is awaiting you."

Grumbling in a loud tone, he opened the drawing-room door, and instead of replying to her pleasant salutations, he sighed and fell on a chair.

"Heavens ! what is the matter with you, my good Matthew?" cried the Countess. "Perspiration is rolling down your face, and you are so pale!"

"Let me breathe, let me recover from the terrible fright I have had."

"Speak, I beg you. What has happened? You make me tremble, Matthew."

"It is enough to make me tremble, Madame ; about a mile from here I was almost murdered."

"Murdered ! what are you talking about?"

"To-morrow I will tell you all about it ; however, I see you will not give me a moment's

peace until I tell you all. Well, to make it short, for I am exhausted, this is what happened: When we arrived at the village in which Frederick Bergmans lives, the coachman suggested crossing the Munster woods to shorten our journey. I refused, for it was quite dark, and I tell you frankly, I do not like to go on lonely or unfrequented roads at night. But, as it was quite late, and I was anxious to get to bed, I let the coachman do as he wished, and we took the short cut. All went well for about half an hour, when we were obliged to go through a valley which was bordered on both sides by thick woods. I did not feel at my ease, for it was black as ink. I could no longer see either coachman or horses, and I began to think of a crime which was committed some years ago in that place, when suddenly I heard a shrill whistle behind me. I cried to the coachman to whip up the horses; but the same whistle sounded on all sides, back of us and in front of us. I was more dead than alive. I imagined myself surrounded by a band of assassins. The coachman was probably more scared than I; perhaps the horses themselves were conscious of their danger, for they flew like the wind along the road. I was clapping my hands at our deliverance, when three or four men jumped from the woods and cried to us to stop; but a few lashes of the whip made the horses brace up again. One of the bandits fired, and

the ball passed so close to my head that my ears still tingle with it. From that moment the horses galloped without stopping until they reached the door of the castle. They are good beasts, and the coachman is a clever fellow. Why it is we were not killed, I do not know at all. Oh ! but it is over; I must rest now, and I beg you will allow me to retire."

The Countess opened a closet, and took out a bottle and a glass.

"My poor Matthew," she said, taking his hand ; "your fright must have been great. Drink a glass of wine, that will set you all right. Now you are safe in the house, all danger is over. I will leave you, in spite of my anxiety to know if you have accomplished the object of your journey; but you are too restless to retire, you should give your mind time to rest. Take a glass of wine, as I told you; that will restore you, my good friend."

The steward looked with astonishment at the Countess ; there was something sweet and caressing both in her voice and look. He knew not what to think, and felt that under this excessive amiability she was hiding something. He supposed the Countess was overcome by his threats of the evening before, and that she only flattered him to prevent his realizing it in a moment of anger.

"Well, Matthew," said Madame de Bruinsteen, "forget your adventure, and have the

goodness to give me some idea of the result of your trip. Did you speak with the matron of the asylum?"

"I was with her almost an hour."

"Will she take Helen without any difficulty?"

"Without the least trouble. The testimony of the physician and your request is all that they require."

"Then we will be rid of this fool. You are sure, Matthew, they will watch her carefully, and will allow no one to see her?"

"I have explained to the matron there is a young man interested in her fortune, and that this bold impostor will attempt to communicate with her, either by letters or a third party, encouraging her to escape."

"They have satisfied me on all points. Since she does not require fresh air, they will give her a strict keeper, who will remain always with her, even sleep in the same room."

"And she will never leave this asylum."

"Never, unless by your request."

"Then she will remain a long while!" said the Countess, rubbing her hands. "You may be sure she will never see either the country or the blue sky again. It is well done; now that she is declared insane, and is shut up forever, no one need worry about her. The secret of her birth will be buried in the asylum. I become manager of her fortune; and if she should die, naturally, as her mother, I inherit her property."

"Yes, yes," grumbled the steward, "you will be rich, whilst I, who sacrificed all my life to your interest, what will I have as recompense? —a little money that I have gathered penny by penny."

"A little money!" said Madame de Bruinsteen, sneering incredulously. "Do you think I do not know how many deeds and loans of the estate are sealed in your strong box? There, there, my good Matthew, I do not want any of your treasures. Now that we have attained the object of our lives, I wish to show my thanks by a handsome present. The mill at Lisch is a beautiful estate, is it not?"

"The mill?" repeated the steward "well?"

"It is a large farm, of fifteen acres of rich land."

"Yes, madame. What do you wish with it?"

"I have decided to make you a present of the mill."

The steward uttered a cry of joyful surprise, and taking her hand, said:

"Ah! madame, such generosity! Now I regret nothing I have done for you. You will give me the mill with the farm, irrevocably?"

"That is to say," replied the Countess, "that you will have a life estate, and you will enjoy the income."

"I should think so," murmured the steward, much disappointed.

"But you are unjust, Matthew," said Madame

de Bruinsteen. "I do all that I can, and yet you do not seem satisfied. As long as Helen lives, what she has will belong to me, but I cannot dispose of it at my fancy. If she dies, the mill will be yours. Be content with the income at present. It is a handsome sum annually."

"Yes, but at any time you can take it back. I do not know how you will feel towards me next year; and if, perhaps, you should marry?"

"No, no! do not fear that."

"You desire, madame, that I should appreciate your present, and that I should look upon it as a recompense for all I have given up?"

"Certainly."

"Well, give it to me in your own handwriting."

"My handwriting?" said the Countess.  
"Write what?"

"It is easy to understand, madame; the settlement of a sum of money equal to the value of the mill and farm. Then indeed I will thank you."

"But," said the Countess, scarcely concealing her anger, "should it happen that I should not inherit from Helen, I would none the less be your debtor. You have me already in your power from my first writing. I will not place myself there a second time."

Matthew rose as if to leave the room, and replied with a bitter smile:

"I understand, madame, your strange amia-

bility; your flattering words make me see that you still wish to deceive me. What may be your intention, is a mystery; but believe me, you are playing a dangerous game. The idiot goes to-morrow; but for all that, everything is not over. You know even were Helen shut up for several years, a word from me would suffice to release her."

"But dear Matthew, you are mistaken. I have no mysterious intention; my sole desire is to recompense you for your devotion. Do not distrust me, I beg you: you will have the mill—if not now, later. We will speak more at length on this subject, when you return from the convent, and be assured you will be satisfied. Could I give you again my signature? Rest now, my friend; you will have to leave early in the morning. Take this lamp. Good night. Sleep well, Matthew; you will be astonished at my generosity."

The steward left the room grumbling, he slowly ascended the stairway, reflecting on the amiability of the Countess and her cunning in offering him a gift which she could take back the next day. What clever scheme was she hiding? Madame de Bruinsteen wished to set a trap under his feet. Perhaps she was seeking some means to prevent his marriage with the governess. How did the Countess know that he had the deeds of the estate? And who had told her these papers were in his strong box? He

thus reached his room, thinking and full of suspicion. When he went to put the key in the lock, the door opened. That surprised him and he stood still, perhaps he had forgotten to close the door. If any one had been in his room during his absence he would soon see. Hearing a sound he started suddenly and turned his head. "Ah! it is you, Martha? Why are you not in bed? It is almost midnight. Did you want to see me before retiring. I appreciate the attention, my dear."

But the widow placed her finger on her lips indicating silence, and whilst he looked at her she took his arm and led him without a word into the room, closed the door, gave him a chair and seated herself near the table.

"What is the meaning of this silence and air of mystery? You make me tremble."

"Speak low, so that no one can hear us," said Martha in a stifled voice. "A great danger is hanging over your head. Your enemies have laid a snare for you, and they will triumph over your loss . . . Answer me, Matthew, and be not surprised at my questions. Is it true that you once committed an act that could, at the slightest indiscretion, deliver you up to justice?"

The steward murmured some confused words, as if he had not understood her question.

"God grant they have deceived me! Oh! Matthew, I learned terrible things to-day; after dinner I thought of the terrible situation in

which I was placed by this unexpected revelation. I asked myself if I could become the wife of a man whom they accused of a crime."

"What! what do you say?" cried the steward growing pale. "A crime? Is it I of whom you speak?"

"Be quiet, let me finish. Be calm, Matthew, and listen to me, the happiness of our lives depends upon your presence of mind. . . . After mature reflection I remembered your love for me, and I thought that without doubt you were the victim of some cowardly person who wished to betray you."

"I do not understand you," stammered the steward.

"No wonder you do not understand. I will speak more plainly; but give me your word of honor in advance to overcome your indignation and not to leave this room without my permission. If you cannot control yourself you will indeed be lost."

"Martha, I will be cool."

"And speak low?"

"Very low."

"If I take these precautions, Matthew, it is only to protect you from a great danger. I can, of course, never become your wife; but you have given evidence of your love for me, and I wish at least to show that I am grateful."

"Not become my wife? Ah, Martha, they have blackened me in your eyes."

"I believe it; however the sincerity of your reply will show me. I implore you, Matthew, for your own happiness, do not hide from me the truth."

"But speak plainly; what do you wish to know?"

Drawing nearer to him, she asked in a low voice:

"Matthew, is Helen really the daughter of Madame de Bruinsteen?"

At this question Matthew was struck dumb, nevertheless after a short silence he replied, trying to smile:

"I believe it at least. Otherwise whose daughter is she?"

"That is begging the question, sir," said Martha in a tone of sad reproach. "I ask you something which since midday I have known as well as you, and I try to obtain the consoling conviction that they have deceived me at least as far as you are concerned; but if you think it proper to pretend with me, it is impossible to protect you, and I must leave you to the terrible fate which threatens you. Think no more of our marriage. Alas! how could I dare bear a name that could be disgraced to-day or to-morrow."

"Heavens! What do you say . . . ?" stammered the steward, frightened by her words, but recoiling before the secret she wished to learn from him. "Martha, I have promised to con-

fide to you certain secrets when we are married. Why do you not wait until then to question me?"

"Because that moment will never come, if I do not learn from your mouth the entire truth."

"Tell me of what do they accuse me? I will see if I am permitted to tell."

The governess appeared offended at his opposition and remained silent for several minutes. Then she said as if she had taken a sudden resolution:

"Helen is not the daughter of Madame de Bruinsteen, she is the daughter of an officer of hussars, and was nursed by the wife of a peasant at Ettenbeck near Brussels . . ."

"Heavens! who told you that?"

"You may know, if you in your turn show some confidence. Well; is Helen the daughter of Madame de Bruinsteen. Yes or no?"

"Well, no," sighed Matthew, trembling, as if this avowal had terrified him.

Martha breathed a sigh of relief. For although she had not doubted that the young girl was her own daughter, the confirmation of her hope filled her with unspeakable joy. But as she saw the steward looked at her with suspicion, she said in a calm voice:

"Alas! this proof of your sincerity renders me truly happy, Matthew; it gives me hope you were unjustly accused. They pretended that you raised this child, brought her in the house of the Count de Bruinsteen, without either he

or the Countess having in advance, the least knowledge of it."

"Calumny! falsehood!" cried the steward.

"Pshaw," said the governess, "remember your promise. I believe, however, that they seek to betray you and to throw the fault on you, so that you alone will bear the penalty of the crime, that the law punishes with five years imprisonment. I wish to save you through gratitude and devotion."

"Who can have told you such things?" murmured Matthew.

"Can you not guess? The nurse is dead, but there are others who knew the secret of the theft of the child."

"Other persons? No, Martha."

"Were there no other witnesses? Sure?"

"Not one; the nurse's husband is dead for the past fourteen years."

This assurance struck a cruel blow, but she concealed her emotion and replied:

"It spoke for itself; at least the Countess. . . ."

"The Countess? It is impossible."

"It was, however, the Countess who confided it to me."

"Would she be such a lunatic? Rather the devil himself gave utterance to this folly!" cried Matthew. "Ah! I know. She shall render me an account of her treachery."

And he rose as if to go out. But the governess, who had foreseen this, held his arm and said:

"Subdue your indignation. If you leave this room until I have finished, nothing in the world can save you from dishonor and prison."

"But it is incomprehensible!" murmured Matthew. "In order to ruin me she puts herself in the same danger. Who could utter such nonsense? What can be her object?"

"The one who provoked it. What intense hatred she bears you, and in accusing you of a crime before me, she wished to prevent our marriage; but you are not guilty of the theft of the child? Are you? Tell me, Matthew. I beg you, do not leave me in this terrible suspense. You hesitate?

"I do not know what reply to make, I seem to be dreaming."

"You perhaps helped the affair," said the widow with treacherous sweetness; "but if you only accomplished the wishes of your master, you have been but the passive instrument of those who had a right to your obedience."

"Yes, yes, that was the way of it," said the steward.

"And in that case it will be easy to mediate in your behalf and to prove your innocence . . . Tell me how did it happen? I already know all; but I wish to find in your recital means to defend you against your enemies. Conceal nothing. Afterwards I will tell you their infamous project to ruin you."

The steward still hesitated, and bent his head

to reflect. Martha kept her sparkling eyes fixed on him—hope and impatience caused her heart to beat furiously.

"The Countess must be a fool," thought Matthew; "to disclose such things to my future wife. Oh! I knew well there was a sting under her false amiability. But that her hatred and villainy could be behind on such a point, I should never have supposed it. That surpasses my penetration."

"Martha!" he added, "I do not wish to pretend that I am altogether innocent, but there is some one more guilty than I, and you can, I believe, forgive me."

"Have courage, Matthew; I would forgive much in the man who has protected and defended me."

"Well, listen; you are going to learn all. Madame . . . or rather Margaret Schinspæu was maid, and I, servant at Count de Bruinsteen's in Brussels, a man worn out and in his dotage, paralyzed with the gout, was in his arm chair for eight months of the year. Margaret by deceit and flattery ruled him completely. The Countess' only relatives were distant ones on his mother's side, and she kept them at a distance so that she would have greater control. I believed that she was prompted by love and devotion for my master; and as she seemed gracious and generous towards me, I helped her all in my power. Was I to blame, Martha?"

Gratitude is a noble sentiment.” She perceived that Matthew tried to justify himself, she gave undivided attention for she wished to know if he were telling the truth or a lie.

“However, Margaret deceived me. She had a secret object, and wished after the old Count’s death to possess his fortune. The best means to accomplish that, she thought, was marriage. Beset on all sides, he allowed himself to be dragged into it; but Margaret only half succeeded, for the marriage contract stipulated that considerable property of the Count’s would, if he had no children by this marriage, return to the legitimate heirs.”

“And she had not a child?” interrupted the widow.

“You are going to hear. Margaret lived two long years in great anxiety as the Count grew stronger and somewhat recovered his mind; he seemed to regret his marriage, and took a great dislike to his wife. There was very little hope that he would mention in his will one who had caused him to make a mésalliance. At last her earnest wish was gratified the third year of her marriage, heaven sent her a daughter, who received the name of Helen. But her joy was of short duration; the child was very delicate and in two or three weeks she became so thin that she feared she would not live. You will understand madame’s grief and despair. Not only the mother suffered, but with the death of

the child, the Count's fortune slipped from her grasp. The doctor pretended that there only remained one hope, to procure for the child a strong nurse and good, fresh country air. I knew of a peasant who lived not far from Brussels. As the little Helen was almost dead, I left in the morning with the servant and child. But reaching the peasant's I found the place already occupied."

"The child of an officer of hussars!" sighed Martha in an almost inaudible voice.

"Yes, of his widow, for the next day I learned he was dead. I knew not what to do, and was much distressed, fearing little Helen would die in my arms for want of proper care. By the promise of a generous recompense, I persuaded the peasant to take charge and nurse the child until I could find another nurse. Returning to the Countess, I told her of my ill luck, and tried to prepare her for the sad news she would probably receive the next day or the day after. The news that her child was going to die, seemed to strike the Countess with indescribable despair and rage; nevertheless she had already some available resource for she begged me to say nothing of all that had happened, and after dinner feigned sleep to continue to mature at her ease a project as clever as it was criminal.

"It was night before she called me . . . Alas! Martha, would to God I had never known this treacherous woman. My life would not be

poisoned by incessant fear and eternal self-condemnation. My heart is honest, and of myself I am incapable of committing an act of injustice, but my pity . . . ”

“What did she say to you?” interrupted the widow with palpitating heart, the words of the guilty one.

“I resisted her, I refused; but she begged and supplicated me, bathed my hands with her tears and did so much that she would have softened the most obdurate heart. Should I refuse, she threatened vengeance, she would send me away. If, on the contrary, I would help her, she would make me rich.”

“But what did she exact of you?”

“Overcome by pity, I acceded to her request, and undertook to carry out her project. . . You are impatient, Martha. I fear to make this disclosure. My mind revolted, my conscience made itself heard. Madame decided in case of Helen’s death to take the strange child in her place so as to insure to herself the Count’s fortune. Laden with gold and authority to make any promises, I left that same night under pretext of inquiring for the health of the child. She was still breathing, but there was little hope of her life. How will I tell you? It cost me a great deal to make this pure woman understand what I desired. At first she repelled the proposition with horror, but the sight of my gold and promise of an annual income finally overcame her scruples.

Circumstances favored in every way the carrying out of my project. The mother of the other child was dangerously ill. The scheme could be carried out without any suspicions being awakened . . . It happened thus: little Helen died the next evening. They announced to the officer's widow that her child had died. A stranger assisted at the interment. No one suspected the slightest fraud; and three months after Count de Bruinsteen pressed the stolen child in his arms, thanking God for keeping his inheritance. . . I see tears in your eyes, Martha, it is a sad story and I have much to complain of. To be led by a false and wicked woman and to have suffered all my life for carrying out my master's orders, when I was still ignorant of the ways of the world."

Martha was much agitated by the ending of the recital. It awoke sad thoughts and opened old wounds. Nevertheless she succeeded in hiding her emotions. Everything she did now was premeditated in her reflections, she had so well foreseen all the possible phases of this conversation that she approached her object with a firm tread, in order to overcome all difficulties. After a short silence she sighed:

"Poor Matthew! To be thus the victim of a too blind devotion. I pity you; the terrible danger which threatens you draws from me tears of pity and agony. Spitefulness is the victim of a corrupt heart. The one for whom

you sacrificed yourself has prepared your downfall, and means to give you up to justice."

"The Countess?" cried the steward.

"Yes, the Countess."

"Never, that cannot be; I have proofs which should prevent her undertaking anything against me."

"You possess a written signature; I know."

"You know it," murmured the stupefied steward.

The widow approached his chair as if to say something of importance.

"Listen to me, Matthew; overcome for a minute your indignation and speak low," she said. "What I have to tell you will fill you with fear and anger; but take courage and fear nothing; I will work with you against your enemies, and rest assured with our united energy we will frustrate all their wicked plans."

"I thank you for your devotion, and I feel happy that the calumny of the Countess has done me no harm in your estimation . . . But I do not understand what you fear, Martha. I repeat to you, madame cannot harm me."

"You think that, because you have in your possession some of her handwriting. But should she get this writing, would you not then be in her power? Could she not then pretend she knew nothing of the theft of the child? Who could prove that Helen is not her child since all the witnesses are dead; they would look on your accusation as a base invention."

"But she cannot get this writing; she does not know where it is."

"It is in the iron-bound chest," said Martha.

"No, no! that is not true," cried Matthew trembling with surprise and fright.

"Matthew, Matthew! why seek you to deceive me? You will not then permit me to save you?"

"Oh! I no longer know what I am saying. Yes, yes, Martha it is in the chest."

"Iron is strong, Matthew; but steel is stronger. If they would break open the chest during your absence, they would soon have the writing."

For a moment his anguish of mind was terrible, he drew a key from his pocket and opened the chest, closed it as quickly and returned to the widow with a joyous smile.

"It is still there; no one has touched it," he cried breathing freely. "But I should say some one had attempted to open the box," he added, examining the lock . . .

"Bah! I am foolish to be frightened, how could a woman open such a piece of workmanship?"

"There are locksmiths in the village."

"But what does that matter? Would the Countess be capable of so criminal an act?"

"Judge for yourself, Matthew. Whilst you were away madame called me. Questioned me for almost an hour to find out if I would enter

into a league against you. She tried to make you so black and despicable in my eyes that did I not know you so well, I would take you for a fiend. She promised me a fortune and a happy life. Inspired by my gratitude to you and hatred to her, I appeared to enter into her project and promised her faithfully my aid to deliver her, as she said, from your cruel tyranny, which has possessed her life for the past fifteen years . . . Be calm I beg you, Matthew . . . I have dragged from her thus the secret of her intentions towards you, and I will find means to protect you against her."

"But what is she thinking of," murmured Matthew, struck by this revelation. "Is she indeed a fool?"

"No, she knows well enough what she wishes. Her object is to destroy the proof of her complicity, and to crush you under her foot. And, some day, should the secret be discovered, to pretend she knew nothing."

"And she imagines she will take her writing from this chest."

"To-morrow you start on a trip; you will be absent until the next day. She will have time to open twenty such chests."

"Her hope will be frustrated," said Matthew. "I will remain at home. In this way she . . ."

The widow had foreseen this reply, which seemed to make an impression on her.

"Impossible! you will go. Should you re-

main it would be necessary to tell the Countess the cause of your refusal. She will accuse me, with reason of double dealing; I will be lost. Alas! we will never again have the slightest hope of realizing our desires."

"Well, there is another way; I will put the document in my note-book, and take it with me."

"Do not do that; the Countess has foreseen it. Should you leave it in your chest or take it with you, she has sworn to get hold of it. And rest assured she will succeed, if we do not find other means to deceive her."

"Truly, Martha, I do not understand you. How could the Countess gain possession of a paper that I carried about me? Whilst I am away, she . . ."

But the widow did not wish to give him time to reflect, and, having heard from a servant all that had transpired in the woods, she interrupted in a trembling voice:

"Wait until I tell you more, Matthew. The Countess dared not tell me openly her thoughts; but I well understood by her voice that she would not withdraw, even to the extent of a crime. She thought perhaps you would take the writing with you, and she spoke in obscure terms of men paid to wait, to attack . . ."

"Of men paid to attack me?" he cried, his frightened mind recalling the scene of the evening. "Are you sure the Countess said such things?"

"Quite sure."

"Well, I will only travel in day time, and will not leave the high road, and will be well guarded."

"Vain precautions. If it were necessary, the men would be concealed in her own room. She will have the writing, no doubt of it."

"In that case I remain at home."

"And Helen? she must go. Delay would only make suspicion and prevent her entrance."

"But to-morrow morning I will say to the Countess that I know of her cowardly scheme against me. I will compel her to give it up in threatening her with my vengeance. I wish to see her at my feet begging for pardon."

"Oh, heaven! You wish to sacrifice me," said Martha with pretended anxiety. "What! would you then dare to leave me at Orsdael a moment with the Countess? No, no; if you reveal my treachery I will fly from here at break of day. She must never know it. Never as long as she lives."

"What means must I use to put the writing out of her power?"

Martha passed her hand across her forehead, appeared annoyed as to what means possible to save him. Suddenly she raised her head and uttered a cry of joy:

"God be praised!" she cried, "I know an infallible means to deceive her and baffle all her attempts. Give me the writing, Matthew, I

will sew it in the lining of my gown. No one will look for it there, and do what they will, she will never find the proof of her crime."

"Give you the writing? My sole proof against her wickedness, my security, my strength," grumbled the steward with an ironical smile. "No, no, this treasure shall never leave me."

"I pray you, Matthew, let me save you," cried the widow, pale and trembling. "Oh! do not refuse the only means of escaping the snares of your enemies."

The steward deceived as to the cause of the extreme agitation of the governess, said to her in a decided manner:

"There, there, Martha, you exaggerate the danger which threatens me. For in any case, the Countess' signature is an infallible means to protect me against her wicked designs. I thank you for your sympathy, but the writing will never be in other hands than mine. Speak no more of it. I will find a hiding place where no one can discover it."

Martha was bitterly disappointed, she put her hands before her eyes and uttered a piercing cry. Her tears this time were not pretense, her heart was really breaking. Her last hope in this terrible extremity she saw destroyed. Her daughter, her poor child would then be shut up in an asylum.

This knowledge lacerated her heart, extinguishing the last spark of hope. She gave her-

self up to her grief, sobbing and weeping until the tears coursed down her cheeks.

Matthew, who thought her offended by his refusal tried to make her understand that she was mistaken. He said he did not doubt her affection for him, and that he had confidence in her, but in this affair he had long since taken a firm resolution from which he could not depart, she must be quiet, he knew where to put the writing so as to frustrate any attempts of the Countess. But say what he would, the widow overcome at her defeat remained sobbing and weeping. The steward looked at her for some time, finally shook his head in despair and seemed to wrestle with a painful thought. Gradually however his face softened. Martha's despair had more effect on him than more subtle efforts.

"Well," he cried at length, "you exact this proof of confidence? Ah! if you could know what you ask."

With these words he walked slowly towards the chest.

The widow watched him; her chair shook under her.

The steward turned towards her and placed in her hand a sealed envelope.

"Take this, Martha, guard it with care until I return from my trip. Do not open it, hide it in your gown, do not let it out of your sight for a moment. You see that I have as much confidence in you as if you were already my wife. How moved you are. Calm yourself, my dear."

Trembling, and almost swooning with joy, Martha placed the writing in her bosom. At first she could not speak, but the possession of the precious paper soon raised her strength. She mastered her emotion and cried, in pressing feverishly the steward's hand.

"Oh! Matthew, if you could know how happy I am. The most beautiful dream of my life seemed to vanish, and suddenly it is realized. I will keep the writing as if my eternal salvation depended upon it. Should they point a sword to my breast I would not give it up. I swear it!"

. . . The day after to-morrow," she replied, in changing her tone, "I will return it to you; we will then deliberate as to what remains for us to do. Retire now, Matthew. You are probably worn out, and you must start early to-morrow. Fear not, death itself could not tear from me this precious trust.

"Yes, I am exhausted; not only by the trip, but much more by the warning I received to-day."

The governess, consumed by an inward fever, rose and said, walking to the door:

"Sleep well, Matthew. Early to-morrow I will go to madame; and if, during the night, she has concocted other schemes, I will quickly return to you. In any case, do not speak to her until we have talked matters over. Good night."

"Good night," murmured Matthew, looking attentively at Martha.

This strange look frightened her, for she seemed to read in his eyes a longing to run after her and take the writing. She finally reached the door, turned her head, smiled sweetly, saying, "Good night, good night!" but as soon as she reached the corridor, she began to run on tip-toe as if she had wings. She bolted the door, ran to the window, measured with her eye the distance to the ground; finally went to the table, lighted a lamp, and drawing the paper from her bosom, with a trembling hand broke the seal and unfolded it.

"Oh! my God! The recognition of my right as mother! The Countess declares that she has ordered the theft of the child. The name, the sweet name of my Laura!"

She was interrupted by a whisper; she thought she heard her own name. A happy smile overspread her face. She rose, concealed the paper, and ran to Helen's room. When she opened the door, she heard a sad cry:

"Oh! Martha, is it really you? I cannot sleep. I dreamed that I would never see you again . . ."

But a kiss smothered the words on her lips.

"My child, my dear child!" said the widow, in a trembling voice. "Stop, weep no more. You will not go to the convent. To-morrow you will be released; to-morrow will commence for you a new and happy life. No more grief and fear. To-morrow you will see your enemies at my feet, begging and imploring for pity."

The girl, frightened by these ardent caresses, turned her head and murmured :

“But who are you then?”

“Who am I? Who am I?” repeated the widow almost crazy with joy. “Who am I? . . The secret of my courage, my love, my life! I am, I am your . . .”

“Oh, my God! What am I to do!” And she drew back trembling.

Helen whose heart beat at the thought of the revelation held her hand in a supplicating manner, but Martha had recovered herself and said, kissing her on the forehead:

“No, no, the time has not yet come. Be quiet, you are the light of my eye, my joy, my hope, but ask no questions. You will not know me until you are free. To-morrow, Laura . . To-morrow, Helen, you will know the tie that binds us . . I must leave you, my child. I fear I may yet yield to a temptation that may prove fatal to us both. Sleep, sleep in peace . . To-morrow a new sun will rise for us both.”

She left the room, closing the door behind her.

## CHAPTER VI.

IT was night and the woods and country were covered with darkness, already a doubtful light trembled in the East. Aurora would soon appear and flood the skies with her golden light. The shadow of a woman came through the thick foliage which bordered the road, she stopped gave a quick glance around trying to pierce the obscurity, and slowly approached the keeper's house.

She entered the garden through an opening in the hedge, went to a small window rapped and putting her mouth against the glass called mysteriously:

“Catharine! Catharine!”

The window was opened.

“Is it you, Martha?” asked the keeper's wife with surprise. “Heavens it is still night. What has happened?”

“Hasten, come down, I must speak to you.”

In five minutes Catharine appeared with her husband. “What are you doing here at such an hour? Have you been obliged to leave the castle?”

The widow threw her arms around her friend's neck and whispered:

"Catharine, Catharine, God has made me victorious, oh! that he will protect me for several hours longer, then my Laura will be free. To-day she can speak of her mother before all the world."

"Well, what have you to say?"

"Keep quiet, Catharine, your husband can hear all we say. I wish to be alone with you."

"Let us go within; André will watch the door."

Catharine spoke a few words with her husband, then led the widow to an inner room, closed the door, and took her hand saying.

"Here, Martha, we are perfectly private; satisfy my burning curiosity. Your Laura will be free to-day. Oh! that your wish may be realized."

The widow related briefly all that had transpired how they had resolved to send her child to a private asylum. All that she had suffered in this extreme peril, and all that she had dared attempt in her despair. After a strong resistance the steward had given her the proof of her right as a mother, and allowed her to take away her child.

Several times during the recital, Catherine had, in spite of herself, uttered cries of joy; but silenced by the widow, she sobbed quietly.

"Calm yourself, Catherine; my time is precious. You understand now why I am here. Possessing this precious paper, I dared not re-

main at the castle; Matthew and the Countess might wrest it from me by violence. Indeed, if necessary, commit a crime. I am only a woman, and in need of the assistance of a man to protect me against the enemies of my child. I am going to Frederick Bergman, his uncle is a notary, he understands the law. They will tell me what I must do, and perhaps accompany me to Orsdael, to forbid Helen's departure. They live two miles from here, the road is unknown to me, and so dark, I fear to go alone; perhaps your husband will accompany me. Fear nothing, Catherine, it is the last sacrifice I will ask of you; whatever the result of the struggle, I will repay you, and remember you and yours until the end of my days."

"You recompense me," sighed Catherine, sadly. "O Martha! it is not kind to speak thus to me; my greatest joy is in your happiness."

"I know it, my friend; but your husband must not be the victim of your generosity. We must not quarrel on this subject. I must start; they may possibly remark my absence, seek and follow me. My God! should they suspect me, they could yet draw from me the liberty of my child—my life!"

"Have confidence in my husband, Martha; he has his gun, and will protect you even at the price of his blood."

When the peasant entered the room, his wife said to him:

"André, it is necessary to start immediately with the governess. She is charged with an important mission. As it is night, and unsafe for a woman to be out alone, the Countess wishes you to accompany her."

"Very well, wife; two minutes to put on my coat, and I am ready."

"Madame is going to Frederick Bergman's. It may seem queer to you."

"Not at all. It matters little to me where the Countess sends me."

"Still a minute," said Catherine; "Madame's message is a secret. No one must see her within half a mile of the Castle. You will lead her through the winding roads of the woods."

"Understood," murmured the keeper, mounting the small stairway to prepare himself for the journey.

"But, Martha," asked the woman after a short silence, "I am wondering who opened the castle door. Some one must know of your being out."

"No one Catherine. I escaped through my bed-room window."

"How; from such a height? It is impossible? You see, Catharine, when I found myself alone in the room with the proofs on my heart, it was impossible for me to find a moment's repose. I trembled, my brow was covered with sweat caused by my great agony; fearing every moment that Matthew would come and take the

precious document from me. With my head out the window I calculated the distance I was to jump and my extreme peril; the least noise made me shiver. The cry of a night hawk nearly made me faint. Ah, I carried in my breast the deliverance of my child, and was yet at the mercy of her tyrants. I could not remain longer in that miserable perplexity. I was about to spring from the sill when a bright thought struck me; tying my sheets together I attached them to the iron bars and tried to descend to the foot of the wall. The great object in view gave me supernatural strength, for I fell from a great height without the slightest hurt. Skirting the wall, I crossed the bridge and crept through the bushes."

The arrival of the game-keeper interrupted her explanation. Andre quietly placed his gun on the ground and said:

"Madame, I await your pleasure."

At the door the women embraced and exchanged a few words, then Martha followed the keeper through the woods. He maintained silence, speaking only in a low voice when an obstacle presented itself in their path. After a good half hour, he led the widow into a large wood, day was just dawning, and one could already recognize objects in the mist.

"André, are we not in danger of meeting some one here?"

"I do not think so, madame. It is so early."

"If anyone *en route* for Orsdael should see me," sighed Martha.

"The road is straight, Madame, I will look before me, if some one comes, we can go into the deep woods."

"No doubt this mystery astonishes you, my friend, but before noon you will know the cause."

"It is not necessary, I am doing my duty and am not concerned about the rest."

"Strange things happen at Orsdael, and shortly there will be disclosures that will electrify every one. You are a good faithful man, and shall be rewarded."

"Strange things, yes, yes, but that does not matter to me, you walk fast, Madame."

"My message requires great haste, but does it fatigue you."

"No, it was only a remark," but with the words he quickened his steps, so that the widow could scarcely follow him, although this haste was in accordance with her wishes.

Occasionally, Martha broke the silence by a few words, merely to recognize her guide, but he, believing he was executing a commission for the Countess, answered only in monosyllables. By degrees the sky grew brighter, and they could see in the distance the church clock, like a beacon of light.

They had passed several peasants, who, with pick-axes on their shoulders, were going to their

daily labors in the fields. As they neared the village, they encountered many more people; but, Martha, believing herself at a safe distance from her enemies, took no notice of the astonished glances of the peasants, continued her journey until the keeper stopped before a large house, and smilingly said :

"Madame, here is the house of Mr. Bergmans. Must I return to Orsdael?"

Reflecting a moment, she said, "Remain here, you cannot return to Orsdael."

"Yes, Madame, with your permission, I will go to the inn near by. If I am required, you can send for me."

An old servant opened the door, and after examining the governess with care, asked :

"Ah! for a will, is it not? Enter; the notary is still asleep, but I will awaken him."

"On entering, Martha said, "My good woman, you are mistaken; I desire to speak to young Mr. Bergmans."

"So early?"

"Without delay."

"I do not know, I dare not," stammered the woman. "Can you not wait half an hour."

"I insist. Go at once and say to Mr. Frederick that the governess from the castle is here, and wishes to speak with him on important business."

"The governess of Miss de Bruinsteen," cried the astonished servant. "Ah! I understand.

Yes, yes, I am going to call him. Sit down, Madame ; he must at least have time to dress."

Martha remained some minutes alone. The certainty of having escaped the pursuit of her enemies, gave her courage, and made her heart beat with joy. When she heard a foot on the staircase, she arose, and awaited with profound emotion the arrival of Frederick."

"Good day, Madame," said he ; "your presence at so early an hour makes me think you have been ill-treated for my boldness of the other day. Forgive me ; I will do all in my power to rectify my mistake."

"No, no, that is not why I am here," interrupted the widow. "I bring good news. Strange things have happened at Orsdael. Sit down and hear me quietly:

Astonished at the happiness betrayed in her eyes, Frederick seated himself in a listening attitude.

"Helen's fate will be completely changed to-day," said Martha, "she will lose the name by which she is known, and at the same time, the large fortune which that name gives her. It is possible that this change may be a serious obstacle to your hopes, however you may judge of the loss. You have loved her too sincerely to refuse your assistance in her rescue; that aid I have now come to seek."

"What do you say?" cried the young man, growing pale. "Lose her name and fortune?

A new danger threatens her. I do not understand, madame."

"Well, you, as well as everyone else are under the impression that Helen is the child of the old Count de Bruinsteen; miserable lie, gross deceit. Helen is a child who was stolen from her nurse at Brussels."

This announcement stupefied Frederick; he gave Martha a look of incredulity and spoke in a voice scarcely intelligible. "You must be mistaken."

"The written proofs of the deception, exist. Helen's true parents are poor, that is, in comparison with the wealth of the Countess de Bruinsteen."

A smile appeared on the face of the young man, and he exclaimed joyously.

"Her fetters will fall, and her persecution will cease. God he praised this good, this innocent Helen will be free and happy; and since her parents have no reason to hate me they will accept my love for their child. Tell me, Madame, who is her father? I wish if possible to see and speak with him to-day."

"Her father is dead," replied Martha, "her mother still lives. Poor woman, for eighteen long years, she mourned the death of her child, suffering shame, humiliation and bad treatment, receiving to-day the blessing of heaven in finding her lost darling."

The young man uttered a cry and extending his trembling hands to Martha said:

"That proud glance, that look of happiness, that illuminates your face,—Ah! my heart has not deceived me, you are Helen's mother."

"Yes, Frederick, I am her mother."

"Madame," said the young man, "I admire you and love you already without knowing you. I will be your son. You know how disinterested and sincere is my love for your daughter. I am well enough off to insure her happiness. Besides, I will one day be a notary, and can earn for her and for you a comfortable and easy life. It is so, is it not? You are the mother of my friend, you will also consent to be my mother."

The notary, on opening the door, was astonished to find his nephew weeping in the arms of a strange woman, who uttered cries of joy and happiness.

Mr. Rutgers, the maternal uncle of Frederick, was a man of fifty or sixty years of age, tall and slim, but still well preserved. A ribbon in his button-hole, his martial air, and a severe look showed that he had been a soldier.

A glance at the woman did not produce a favorable impression on him, her clothes were in disorder, and soiled from the mud of the road.

To avoid embarrassment and make his presence known, the notary coughed lightly.

Frederick ran to him with open arms.

"Uncle, uncle," he cried, "Helen is not

Madame de Bruinsteen's daughter. They stole her from her parents. Here, here is her mother, her own mother! Now there is no obstacle to my happiness."

The notary, surprised at this outburst, pushed his nephew aside, and after a moment, asked:

"Helen is not the daughter of Madame de Bruinsteen? You dream or you are mistaken. Now could it be possible? How do you know it, madame?"

"From Matthew, the steward."

"And what did he tell you? Speak, I beg you give some explanation, for this news if true is more important than you think."

"The child of the Countess was ill and dying, soon after its birth; they put it out to nurse with a woman who lived near Brussels. At the time she had already the care of another child who had received the name of Laura. When the Countess learned that her child was dying, she sent Matthew to the nurse to bribe her to commit a crime. They changed the little ones making me believe that my child had died during the night. They buried the child of the Countess, and some months after Madame de Bruinsteen had my child brought to her house. In this way she hoped to keep her husband's property. The nurse is dead, all the witnesses are dead.

"But the proof of all this?" cried the notary, much agitated.

"The steward has told all the circumstances to me."

"He tells you an untruth: he must have deceived you. Has he no proofs?"

Martha drew from her bosom a folded paper.

"Here, read this, sir: this writing, signed by the countess herself, is proof sufficient."

The old man slowly read the paper, at times raised his shoulder and uttered exclamations as if scarcely crediting what he read.

"Is it possible?" he murmured as if to himself. "Yes, yes, of this heartless woman we can well believe it. Only a miserable thief would appropriate another woman's child, to deprive her husband's legitimate heirs of their property. Strange discovery!"

He walked in the room, looked at his nephew with a pleased expression, and said:

"Come, come, to my heart, happy one."

Frederick, who was mistaken as to the import of these words, threw himself on his uncle's neck and thanked him warmly for his consent to his marriage. He told the old man that Helen, rather Laura, would be to him a gentle daughter; they would both love him as a benefactor and father.

These thanks seemed to displease the notary. He frowned, repulsed the young man, and shaking his head, said to the widow in returning the paper:

"Madame, will you excuse me? I have a few

words to say to Frederick in private. In a moment he will return."

Taking his nephew's arm, he led him into an office, closed the door, and with much emotion said to him: "When the Count de Bruinsteen died, his only heirs were his mother's relatives; these heirs being the Dalsten brothers, Miss Vandael, and your mother. The first three died without descendants; your mother was their legitimate heir, at the same time she also inherited from the count. All the fortune that Madame de Bruinsteen possessed has now fallen to you. The Castle of Orsdael, all the other property, is now yours. You are a millionaire, and as money is a real power and deserves respect, I make my bow to you."

This information bewildered the young man; he looked at his uncle without speaking, as if he doubted the possibility of so unexpected a fortune.

"I—I will be the only heir to the Count de Bruinsteen."

"The only heir, my nephew; no one can dispute the succession."

The young man raised his eyes to heaven and cried with rapture:

"Oh! my God! I thank you. You have given me the means to make her happy."

But the Notary took him by the hand, saying in a reproachful tone: "Be not so childish, Frederick; you will cause much grief to the per-

son waiting in there, by giving her hope for that which can never be realized. Miss de Bruinsteen exists no longer; you are a millionaire; all former ties are broken between you and Helen."

"What—what do you say?" cried Frederick, trembling with indignation. "Fate has given me her fortune, and I give her up because my happiness has deprived her of the fortune she would one day have possessed? I would then never have loved her, but her money. No, no, my uncle, you are mistaken; Helen—Laura will become my wife. I wish it now more than ever. This fortune, that has for so long a time belonged to her, would become odious to me, could I not share it with her."

"But duty, decency, the world?"

"Nothing can make me change. My good uncle, forgive me—the thought of so cruel a betrayal wrings my heart."

"So be it; this fortune renders you independent," replied the notary with a discontented air. "Nevertheless you will yet reflect. If you are so young and generous as to be indifferent to fortune, you will not be so indifferent to honor—the name, at least, of the family to which you will offer your hand and name."

"Ah! that family can but be honorable," he cried joyously.

"Imprudent boy—a governess, a servant!"

"A servant," repeated the young man, "it is

a ruse! This woman disguised herself to liberate her child. She belongs to a most aristocratic family."

"Who is Helen's father?"

"He is dead."

"But what rank had he?"

"I do not know; but rest assured, my uncle, that the woman whom you regard as a servant has received a most beautiful education, and everything shows she has always been accustomed to good society. It is a secret that I have respected because I believe it necessary for Helen's welfare."

"Well, be prudent, Frederick," said the notary, going towards the door. "Be calm, we will learn the secret. I hope, in any case, your wife will be one whom I can receive."

Entering the room he approached the widow, excusing his short absence, and said: "Madame, before we speak again of the surprising news you have given us, permit me, I beg, to ask to whom I have the pleasure of speaking. The interest we have in the fate of your daughter makes us anxious to know her family."

"I understand," replied Martha, with a smile of wounded pride. "Helen, or rather Laura, when she takes her own name, is the daughter of honorable people, and her mother can give her a dowry of five hundred thousand dollars."

"Five hundred thousand dollars!" cried the notary. "You can give your daughter a dowry like that? You, madame?"

"Ah! ah, now you see! Did I not tell you so?" said Frederick.

"And as far as her name is concerned, I do not know that Laura will lose by the exchange. She is the daughter of an officer who died for his country . . ."

"Thank God!" said Frederick, raising his eyes towards heaven.

"An officer!" cried the notary with a pleased smile.

"An officer of hussars, who was killed at the Battle of Waterloo."

"What regiment?" he asked. "A friend, a comrade, perhaps . . ."

"The 8th regiment, sir."

"His name, his name?"

"Hector Hagens."

"Yes, yes, I knew him, knew him well," cried the old man. "A courageous soldier, a generous heart. You are his widow, madame? Your father's name is? . . ."

"Jacques Sweerts."

"Captain Sweerts, from whom I received my sword?"

"Captain Sweerts, sir."

Overcome by emotions and the recollections of the past, the notary fell on Martha's neck and pressed her to his heart. Then the old man ran to his nephew, embraced him also, and cried:

"Ah, Frederick, you are indeed doubly happy. Helen is worthy of you . . . Helen . . . Laura

Hagens will become your wife, and I, your old uncle, will take greater pleasure in this than in your fortune.

"Madame, madame, your father was my protector, your husband my comrade and friend: by the remembrance of that we will be brother and sister, we will rejoice together at the happiness of our dear children."

Then he told Martha that Frederick was the sole heir to the Count de Bruinsteen.

The widow, possessed by a secret anxiety, soon interrupted him, and said:

"Gentlemen, allow me now to tell you why I am here. Yesterday Madame de Bruinsteen determined to shut my daughter in a private asylum. . . . I beg you, Frederick, do not interrupt me. . . . It is not possible, you say. Yes, it is possible; and would have happened were I not so fortunate as to have in my possession a document which will free her forever. A physician gave to the Countess a diagnosis stating that my daughter was insane. This morning at ten o'clock a carriage is to come from the city to take her to the asylum. I know there is ample time to reach Orsdael before that; but gentlemen, you will understand my impatience. I cannot rest as long as my child is in the power of these tyrants. There are times when my heart sinks and I feel as though I would fail."

"Unquestionably! Certainly—I will get a car-

riage for you; you will start immediately," interrupted the notary.

"I will accompany you," said Frederick.

"It is what I wish to ask both you and your uncle. I am only a woman and dare not go alone to Orsdael. They might, perhaps, use force and take the proof from me. Then all hope of my child would be lost. I beg you, come with me; do not refuse me your help."

"I refuse?" said the notary, "rather I will accompany you with joy. I can, indeed, be useful. Fortunes and family affairs are in my jurisdiction. Be tranquil, I will give orders for the carriage; I have two good horses that go like the wind."

He rang: "Barbary," he said, "put the horses in as quickly as possible; let me know as soon as they are ready."

"A moment's patience, and in a short while we will be on our way to Orsdael. . . . What a blow for Madame de Bruinsteen! Yesterday a countess and a millionaire, to-day poor, disgraced, and convicted of a crime punishable by law with five years' imprisonment."

"Ah! and Matthew," cried the young man, "this man without heart, this vile instrument of a cruel woman, can never have punishment sufficient to atone for all he has caused my poor Laura to suffer."

The widow cast down her eyes and seemed to think deeply. In a moment she looked up and asked the notary:

"Do you not know Catharine Peeters, the wife of the game-keeper at Orsdael?"

"Indeed, yes," replied the old man, "she was sutler in her father's company. I know her well and chat with her each time we meet."

"This woman watched all night over my wounded husband on the field of Waterloo; 'twas through her I became governess at Orsdael; she has sacrificed everything for me. Without her aid, poor Laura would be placed in an asylum. My happiness, yours, Frederick, the rescue of my child, and your fortune are all the work of that noble, courageous woman. And since you are to become the head of the family, I charge you, my son, with this, the payment of a most sacred debt."

"Thanks, my mother," said Frederick, with emotion. "Say no more. The power of doing good is given me; I will show you I know how to use it. Rest assured Catharine shall never regret what she has done."

A servant entered saying, "The carriage is ready, sir."

In going toward the door the widow objected. "But should we not have the Burgomaster? Suppose the Countess should refuse to give up the child?" The notary reflected, finally said:

"Let us go: it will cause a delay of several hours. The proof you have will defy all resistance; the sight of that document will shock her like a thunderbolt."

The game-keeper who stood with his gun, asked if he should return to the castle. Martha after a few words with Frederick, told him he should breakfast at the notary's and then await further orders.

Stepping into the carriage, they were soon on the road to Orsdael.

## CHAPTER VII.

MATTHEW had passed a miserable night. Although much excited by the events of the day, fatigue made his sleep troubled by miserable dreams.

At sunrise, when the castle bell called the workmen, Matthew awoke in a cold perspiration. He tried to go off to sleep again; but the recollections of his terrible dream caused his heart to beat so furiously that he could not quiet himself. He sat up in bed, finally dressed, all the while muttering to himself.

"Why should I be so agitated? It is only a frightful dream. Martha is devoted to me; her interests are the same as mine. Why would she deceive me? In any case I have been imprudent, thus to put myself in a woman's power. I must have been bewitched or demented! . . . The Countess is the cause of it all. Her hatred must indeed be strong to have told to a stranger all that wicked story. It is incomprehensible, and if it were possible, I would say that Martha lied shamelessly. But no one on earth knew of this dreadful affair but the Countess and myself: it is she, then who has maliciously betrayed me. How can I avenge myself? Before taking the

idiot, I wish to see the Countess at my feet . . . First I will get the proofs from Martha; without this armor I am powerless. Ah! we will see. The Countess must render me an account of her infamous conspiracy."

With these words he knocked at Martha's door, listened, and knocked again, "Martha, Martha, it is I. I will await you, but answer me, I pray."

The most complete silence reigned about him; he became somewhat anxious, called the governess loudly, knocking against the door; but it was useless, all was as silent as the tomb.

A stifled cry escaped him; he grew pale, although he tried to reassure himself thinking probably Martha had risen early.

He ran down stairs, asked the porter if he had seen Martha. The latter answered in the negative, at the same time mentioning the workmen and others who had left the castle that morning, said he had the only keys, and since the bell had sounded he had been at the door.

The last words caused a smile of relief. The governess was then certainly in the castle, for there was only the large door. Nevertheless he was not quite satisfied, and went from the top to the bottom of the house, asking every one if they had seen the governess. He remembered that Martha had said she would rise early.

He then went up the stairway that led to Madame de Bruinsteen's apartments; her maid told him that madame was still sleeping soundly.

"Go to madame, ask her for the keys of Martha's room; I must have them immediately. If you do not bring them I will get them myself. Run, fly! Madame must get up, otherwise something may happen."

The servant brought two keys. Without waiting to hear what the Countess was saying Matthew hurried up the steps. He opened the door of Martha's room, and on glancing at the bed found it empty. Pale and trembling, he opened the second door and saw the young girl seated at the end of the room. She must know what had happened if she was dressed at such an early hour.

Matthew approached the young girl, and seizing her wrist, nearly crushed it.

"Pay attention and be truthful, because if you attempt to deceive me, I am capable of almost anything. Where is the governess?"

"I do not know," stammered the trembling girl.

"Wretch! do not lie, or I will kill you."

"Have pity! I know not; were you to take my life I could tell you nothing further."

"Why are you already up and dressed?"

"A strange noise wakened me."

"What noise?"

"A blow, as if something had fallen."

But the young girl, frightened at the thought that telling the truth she would put her benefactress in danger, began to cry and said:

"A noise, a falling."

"Do not make my blood boil, unhappy one," cried Matthew. "What did you hear?"

"The night hawk, without doubt."

The steward understood that the girl knew much that she wished to hide. He knew her inflexibility, and was furious that she would tell him nothing. Turning towards the door, he cried menacingly, "Wait a minute, I will make you speak." In leaving the room he spied a piece of folded paper which had been pushed back by the door when he opened it. He unfolded the paper and read the following lines, written in lead pencil:

"Helen, I leave to save you. Whatever happens, fear nothing. My promise will be fulfilled; in a few hours I will rescue you for ever."

Matthew looked at the paper for some time, with a puzzled air; then uttering a cry of rage, ran into the other room, seeking to wreak his vengeance on Helen, when he noticed the sheets that were tied to the iron bars.

"Gone! Fled during the night," he cried. "It is impossible to follow her; she is already several miles from Orsdael. Alas! she has ruined my life. I am lost, lost."

Paralyzed with anger, and terribly frightened, he rushed towards the young girl, took her by the shoulders, and shaking her violently, asked:

"Where is your governess? What has she

promised? What is she going to do? Speak, or I will surely kill you."

But the girl, shaking her head, turned her back and remained silent, although the steward menaced her several times, and in his anger, struck her with his fist on the head and shoulders. He then left the room, cursing and swearing, but stopped in the corridor to reflect on his critical situation. He was as pale as death, his knees trembled, his brain was bewildered.

What could be Martha's intention? She wished without doubt to be revenged on the Countess, who had maltreated her, but she did not understand, in her folly, that she would lose at the same time her enemy and her protector.

He went down stairs, and opening the drawing room door found the maid, who said to him that madame had risen and was coming down.

He fell on a chair, distracted anew by terrible perplexities.

Martha could not wish him any harm—she was without doubt deceived as to the results of what she was going to do.

Perhaps he could still prevent the disclosure of the secret, because Martha would certainly follow his advice as soon as he could speak with her. In this uncertainty he resolved to say nothing to the Countess of his permitting Martha to carry away the proofs of the substitution of the child. He was very much ashamed of this weakness, well convinced besides that the Coun-

tess would neither fear nor spare him when she knew the paper was not in his possession.

When Madame de Bruinsteen entered the room she was surprised to see tears in Matthew's eyes.

"You weep, Matthew?—you inspire me with dread. What has happened? The servants speak of something terrible, but I trust it is nothing."

The steward closed the door and stood with his arms crossed and his eyes burning before the Countess.

"Sit down madame, sit down, I command you. You have committed a crime, I am your inexorable judge. What did you say yesterday to the governess?

"What does this mean?" murmured the Countess; "you frighten me."

"Answer me," said Matthew, looking her in the face with contracted lips and closed teeth. "What did you say yesterday to Martha?"

"My God! What is the matter with you?" stammered the Countess, frightened; "they say you wish to kill me. Oh! I am going to call for help."

"A single cry, and I will break your head," cried the steward beside himself. "Answer me then."

"What did I say to the governess? Oh! nothing much, Matthew. It is true I told her that Helen would be taken to an asylum to-day."

"It is not that."

"I did not even mention the name of the house."

"Miserable imposter," cried Matthew, "you do not wish to avow your fault. Your mask will fall. Madame, I know all."

"What do you know? Speak clearly, I beg of you. You make me tremble."

"Have you not told Martha the secret of Helen's birth?"

"What a stupid idea! Am I going to lose myself?"

"You did not say that Helen was the child of an officer of hussars? and that she was stolen from the nurse at Brussels?"

"What a question. My God! not a word has escaped me."

"What boldness! The denial is useless. You wished to be revenged on me, and told Martha the child was carried to your house against your wishes. Weak liar that you are, you think to throw the blame on me, but you are mistaken. The prison . . ."

"Shut up, stop your impudence," said the Countess, "some one will hear you. What bad dream has turned your head? Your mind is wandering. I reveal to the governess the secret of Helen's birth? I sell my liberty and honor to be revenged on you? How absurd! How impossible!"

"Traitor!" groaned Matthew.

"You do not wish to believe me?" said Madame

de Bruinsteen. If you can prove to me that I have by one word given her the least suspicion of this secret, I will give you the half of my fortune. You laugh. Is it not enough? If you find me capable of such stupidity, I permit you before God and the world to be revenged on me, even to kill me."

These words, pronounced with great energy, gave no further room for doubt.

Matthew let his head fall on his breast, convinced at last that he had been wrong in accusing the Countess. He was overpowered with despair, he blushed with shame, to think that he had been led by a blind love to a fatal revelation, and that he had acted treasonably towards his accomplice. He finally resolved not to admit that he had spoken of the crime to Martha. Though filled with fear, he had a secret hope that Martha would hear nothing against him, but this hope was very uncertain. A cold sweat stood on the steward's brow.

"Go, my good Matthew," said the Countess, "You are ill. I am sorry for your foolish terrors. Try to calm yourself. There is an infallible way of convincing you that your suspicions are wrong. I am going to ring for Martha."

"Useless," said Matthew, "Martha is no longer at Orsdael. She tied her sheets to the iron bars and escaped by the window from the castle. God knows if she is not already four or five miles from here with our secret. Alas, what will happen?"

The Countess stared at him for a minute as if stunned by the news. "Fled?" she repeated. "Martha has fled from the castle during the night? What do you mean?"

She approached Matthew with an expression of suppressed anger and demanded in a severe voice:

"You say that she has fled with our secret: have you been weak enough to confide it to her?"

"It is needless, she knows all."

"But who told her?"

"Not I."

"You must have done so. I have several times feared your idiotic love for that woman would bring you into trouble—the idea of your being blind to that excess of folly and crime!"

"My head was turned. I do not know what happened," said Matthew, with a groan. "It is an enigma that fills me with fear. I said nothing to her; she has learned nothing from me. How does it happen then that she knows all? Is there still some one else who knows our secret?"

"No one but us—then I do not understand you," said the Countess. "You are as frightened as if your sentence rung in your ears, Matthew; I thought you more courageous. What does it matter? Martha will say that Helen is not my daughter. Well, I will insist that she is calumniating me, and in case of necessity I will make

her swear, in order to apologize for the insult to my honor. Nothing is more simple. There is neither testimony nor proof, and even if you have disclosed the secret it will only be necessary to say she is lying."

Matthew drew a profound sigh, but answered nothing.

Madame de Bruinsteen remarked, after a brief silence:

"This is what disturbs me—I cannot imagine what Martha has in view, to fly thus, in the middle of the night. A surprise of Frederick Bergmans, no doubt. Matthew, Helen is in her room?"

"Yes, yes, she is in her room," he answered, in searching his pockets, "see, she put this letter under her door: perhaps it will explain Martha's intentions."

The Countess took the letter and read it. At first her lips contracted with rage, then an ironical smile played about her mouth. "'I leave to save you. In several hours you will be free.' . . . Ah! only that? We will see. Matthew, Helen's room is locked? Do you not see, it is only trouble that Frederick Bergmans wishes to cause us? He has bribed Martha like Rosalie, with money and promises, to forward his schemes. I understand the whole affair. She has gone to tell Frederick that Helen has been taken to an asylum: they hope to prevent it. Hasten, Matthew, we will overthrow their hopes."

"We possess infallible means," murmured Matthew, more than ever plunged in deep thought. "Certainly, they will come with the representatives of the law."

"The representatives of the law have nothing to do here, and besides, they will not find Helen. We will not wait for the carriage that is coming from the city. Make haste and have our horses harnessed, and you can start with her. Whatever Martha and Frederick have intended, they will fail; for as soon as Helen is several miles from here I fear nothing. All that they could do would be to delay the departure of the crazy girl, but as soon as she has started I will have plenty of time to institute a suit against Martha and her accomplice. I do not understand how you could be so cowed by an event so disagreeable, it is true, but none the more agreeable for us. What can they do to us without testimony and without proof? Let us be courageous. Prepare for your journey, start without delay, make the horses fly, and Helen will soon be beyond the reach of our persecutors."

Matthew rose and reflected: a smile illuminated his face, while he said with emphasis:

"Yes, start immediately, go far, very far. I have an idea that if I go to Paris with Helen"—

"Why not to an asylum?"

"There are plenty of asylums in France."

"I do not understand your intention."

"You see, madame, the authorities could de-

mand the name of the asylum, and perhaps our enemies might gain their ends. In France, all their researches would be vain. Later you could write me, when all would be over, and I could bring her back. I could take enough money to surmount all difficulties."

The Countess regarded him with a sneering air.

"Matthew, you are afraid. Like a child, you are thinking more of your own safety than of Helen's. I would not be surprised if in an exaggerated fear you would not like to carry away all your money. However, go to France—it is perhaps a prudent measure; but order the horses immediately, so that there will be no delay when you are ready. I do not believe you have anything to fear at present. Hasten however, it is necessary to be foreseeing."

The steward went towards the door. The Countess cried to him again:

"Have courage Matthew; things are not so bad as they seem."

But he had hardly left the house before he became as pale as death, trembling in every limb.

"Well, what has happened now," cried the Countess, who followed him with her eyes.

"Too late, too late," said the steward. "There is a carriage, and in it are seated Martha and Frederick. There are others in the carriage. Wretched woman, we are lost."

"Lost?" said the Countess, after a moment's

reflection. "Lost. Not yet, Matthew. If this evil must come we will at least be revenged on our persecutors. They will not succeed. Go; hasten and take Helen to the cellar under the tower by the secret stairway. No one will find her. Remain near her until I call you. I will say she has already gone. Leave it to me, and trust me our enemies will leave the castle without discovering anything. Then you can take the idiot to France. But, my God! how frightened and undecided you look."

She took him by the shoulders, and pushing him towards the door, watched him a minute, saw him disappear at the landing, then turned towards the hall, and seated herself on a sofa in a most indifferent attitude.

A moment later the door was opened, and Martha and Frederick entered.

"Vile deceiver!" cried the Countess, pointing towards the door, "out of my sight, or I will call my servants to chase you from the castle. Justice will punish you for your perversity!"

And she rose to ring the bell, but the notary stayed her hand.

"What does this mean?" she said, "you use violence in my own house? We will see how this will end. I am only a woman, but . . ."

"Sit down, madame; I beg you spare yourself an inevitable shame," said the notary, conducting her to the sofa with a frigid air. "Hear me

a minute. You understand without doubt, that a noise of any kind will be very bad for you."

"Well! what have you to say to me?" grumbled the Countess.

"Madame, the child born of your marriage with Count de Bruinsteen lives no longer; she died the 10th of February, 1816. By a criminal substitution, they brought into your house the child of an officer of hussars, called Hector Hagens. Justice alone can punish such an act. We are here in the name of the legitimate mother, to require the immediate restitution of the child. Do not refuse us, madame; your resistance will only cause us to call in the authority of the law, and reflect on the public shame you will draw on yourself."

"Ah! ah!" sneered the Countess, "you will not deny that I have calmly heard the story of the officer's child: it is a clever invention. As to Helen, she is no longer at Orsdael."

"Heavens!" cried Martha, growing pale; "no longer at Orsdael?"

"You thought I did not understand why you had fled like a thief in the night," replied the Countess victoriously. "There on the table is the piece of paper which you had thrown under Helen's door. Unfaithful servant, you were going to deliver her—meaning that you would sell her in order to betray me. Whatever means you intended to employ, your plot is destroyed in advance. Helen is far from here, going to a for-

eign country. She will never return to Belgium, and none of you know where she is."

There was a heart-rending cry, and Martha fell unconscious on the floor of the room. Frederick rushed to her, took her in his arms, raised her head, and tried to recall her to consciousness.

"Madame," said the notary, "you are going too far. We have proofs: you will be put in prison."

"What proofs can you have of what is not true?"

"The signature is in your handwriting."

"A forgery!"

"Wait, you will be convinced." The notary went to the fainting widow and felt in the folds of her gown for the written proofs. His search was fruitless; he trembled with anxiety and impatience at the idea of having lost the precious paper.

"My God! my God! it is not possible! Martha, Martha!"

But at this moment confused cries were heard in the castle, and before they could move the door was violently opened, and Helen, pursued by the steward, rushed in and threw herself at the feet of the Countess.

Matthew, who appeared white with rage, wished to stop her; but Frederick, letting Martha fall in the arms of the notary, rushed for the steward, took him by the throat, and throwing

him against the wall as if beside himself, cried: “A step, a movement, and I will crush you.”

During this time the young girl, utterly terrified, cried, extending her arms toward the Countess:

“Oh! my mother, pardon me, have pity, he will kill me. I am your child; spare my life, mother, dear mother!”

This cry of distress, this sweet name of mother, reached the heart of the widow. She opened her eyes, threw an uncertain look around her, and heaving a deep sigh, opened her arms.

The notary took her hand and said, in a trembling voice:

“The proof, the paper! Ah! it is here!” and turning towards the Countess, “now madame, you remember ordering your servant to steal the child. It is impossible to deny it—all the miserable circumstances accompanying the crime. You know what awaits you; the loss of your fortune; the everlasting disgrace of a five years’ imprisonment.”

Madame de Bruinsteen held her eyes for a minute on the paper, then becoming pale, trembled in every limb. She looked in a revengeful manner at Matthew, uttered a piteous cry, and hid her face in her hands.

“Mother, mother! what is the matter? What new danger threatens you?” anxiously asked the kneeling girl.

“Laura . . . Helen,” cried the widow, re-

covering herself. "No longer call that woman your mother. Come to my heart, dear one."

But suddenly she became quiet, fearing the effect of her revelation on the child.

"Oh! Martha, you here," cried the girl, throwing herself into the arms of the widow, who having embraced her tenderly, took her arms from her neck and said with apparent calm:

"Helen, you are not the child of that woman; you were stolen from your cradle. She was your evil genius. She is a stranger in heart and feeling. God has restored to you your own mother."

The young girl looked at her anxiously.

"My mother? Ah! and is she still alive?" she asked in a scarcely intelligible voice.

"She lives, she lives! Control yourself."

"Heavens," cried the young girl, "that celestial smile, that look, your soul in your eyes! O Martha, Martha, if you were my mother I should die of happiness."

"Well, Helen, you are my child. I am your mother." The young girl was almost unconscious on her mother's breast, tears of joy flowed down her cheeks, she caressed and embraced her, then suddenly said:

"I have a father also, have I not? Where is he?"

"Alas! your father is no more. Here, my child, is his likeness." She handed the girl a small gold locket.

"Hector, my father?" cried Laura, throwing herself on her knees; "I now understand the secrets with which I was surrounded. I have suffered a great deal; but God is good, and the reward is greater than all the agony endured."

Frederick remained by her side, gazing with happiness and admiration on her face. These revelations had taken place so quickly that Helen had not had time to notice his presence.

Martha took her hand, and giving it to Frederick said, "Laura is your name, my child, and you must thank the good God, who not only restores to you your mother, but who gives you also a husband worthy of your love."

The young people embraced each other with tears of joy.

"Come, let us go now," said Martha, taking her daughter by the arm; "let us leave this house of hateful memories; liberty, air and security are necessary for our joy."

But the Countess, who had been plunged in grief, was much frightened at hearing these words. She fell on the ground and dragging herself to Laura's feet sobbed through her tears. "Have pity on my misery! Mercy, mercy, for a poor woman. Do what you will; take my fortune: I will be poor, I will repent, but do not deliver me up to justice. I will obey you like a slave, only save me from prison, Helen. Laura, see me at your feet: do not refuse my prayer, have pity on me?"

Matthew, seeing the Countess at the young girl's feet, threw himself before Martha, pleading for mercy. He did not utter a word of reproach, knowing the mother's love had caused her to act as she had done; but he recalled his love for her, this sentiment to which she owed her child's freedom; he begged she would not be revenged on him who had thus contributed to her happiness.

This supplication was so humble that Martha was touched, and seemed undecided, when her daughter turned to her with clasped hands, saying:

"Oh! mother, mother, have mercy on Madame de Bruinsteen—forgive her!"

"I wish to forget all, my child. The misery of madame and Matthew will not add to my happiness, but I know not what to do."

"Hear me," interrupted the notary; "they seem to be repentant. We can without doubt save them from the law, and even insure them their personal possessions. They can leave the country to-day: if they will accept my proposition and give their signatures to that effect, I will assist them. Here Martha, take this proof—guard it well. I will attend to everything and be with you at noon."

Martha took the girl's hand and led her to the carriage. The widow exclaimed joyfully upon seeing Catharine standing by and said:

"Now, my child, this is the one who has re-

stored you to your mother, and given us both so much happiness. She has a noble heart." They both embraced her, at which the old vivandiere was so affected that great tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Catharine, dear Catharine, come with us; your husband is awaiting our return. We will have a fete, and you must be by my side. Your future is assured; my son has a good heart, he will not forget you. Your husband will be our steward, and you will always remain near me, and be my faithful companion and friend."

Catharine was stupefied with joy and surprise. She resisted the sweet violence of Martha, and refused the gifts showered upon her. Frederick lifted her into the carriage, she knew not how; the coachman cracked his whip, and they disappeared behind the angle of the wood in a cloud of dust.







# THE SORCERER.

BY

HENDRIK CONSCIENCE.

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Translated from the Original Flemish.

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# “THE SORCERER.”

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE BOROUGH OF ISERSTEEN.

How many years, indeed centuries, have passed since the facts which I am about to relate to you transpired, I dare not say. Centuries of forests have disappeared in the interim, populous towns, impregnable fortresses have become ruins, and the soil of Flanders transformed by the vicissitudes of time and fortune.

In the most fertile part of Isergan rose the towers of the beautiful fortress of Isersteen. It was not an eagle's nest, with a ferocious Lord of the manor, inspiring terror in the hearts of the people. On the contrary, Isersteen seemed to smile on the traveler and offer him cordial hospitality. In truth, this borough was surrounded, as was the custom, by a stone wall. The battlements, loop holes and arches gave evidence that some one was always on the look-out for the safety of the Lord, but the draw-bridge was lowered, the door open, and men armed with their cross-bows or their halberds

walked on the ramparts with an indifferent, but none the less threatening air.

If one would climb one of the high towers ascending from the four corners of the castle, the view extending over an immense territory would be superb. The fields seemed as though covered with an immense green velvet carpet sprinkled with golden buds, white marguerites and a thousand wild flowers.

There between the two shores, surrounded with trembling rushes, flowed the river Iser, so peaceful, like a silver ribbon winding through the green meadows. Above all, one saw at pasture in the meadows splendid cattle, spotted cows and innumerable flocks of sheep; and heard the singing of the birds, mingled with the happy voices of the shepherds and peasants.

Count Foucard van Isersteen, Lord of the borough, was a man of imposing carriage. He was tall, well formed, somewhat coarse in appearance. One would almost tremble at his severe countenance if from time to time a sweet smile did not appear, to soften his expression. Being passionately fond of hunting, and all that would exercise and strengthen his muscles, jealous of his authority, punctilious of his honor, he was an enemy to violence and scrupulously just.

His wife, a noble lady, who in her youth had been a noted beauty, had, no doubt, by the extreme sweetness of her disposition, softened the natural severity of her husband. Her only pleas-

ure was in her home life, entertaining her husband's guests, especially minstrels and troubadours. She could listen an entire evening to tales of chivalry, ballads and love songs.

At the time of our story the young heir of Isersteen, Wilfred, had almost attained his twentieth year.

As the parents had lavished all their love and hopes on this, their only child, it was not surprising that Wilfred united all the heroic strength of his father with the gentle grace of his mother. The character of each could readily be recognized in him. If the father had practised in him the use of arms and exercises of the body, and had instilled in him a love of hunting and chivalrous sports, in like manner his mother had encouraged the more quiet pleasures. Singing was a favorite amusement; and in the long twilight he would sing and relate stories so well that he had been dubbed “The Troubadour.”

Wilfred returned his parents' love with an intense devotion; his love for his mother was most perfect in its entirety. Formerly the Countess had never betrayed the slightest nervousness whilst her son was hunting, were he alone or with his father—so he spent his evenings with her, she was content; but now, on the contrary, each time there was a meet or a tournament in the neighboring borough, the Countess seemed anxious and a prey to some mysterious disquietude.

Many times, in order to satisfy her, he remained at home several days, but his restlessness overcame him, and he entreated his mother to give him some reason for her strange caprice.

“Ah! my dear Wilfred,” she replied, “your mother’s heart is annoyed by a secret sorrow. How to explain it I know not, but I have the feeling that a great danger threatens you. At night I awake with a start, having the most frightful dreams; I see only blood, and unknown voices cry out to me: Watch, watch over your child. A cruel fate seems suspended over your head . . . And these voices follow me during the day, making me nervous and depressed. Be kind and indulgent to your poor mother. She seems to dread some terrible misfortune will happen to you either at the hunt or in the tournament. Perhaps her fears are unfounded, but they render her seriously unhappy. Wilfred, my dear son, I beg you remain a few days longer with me.”

Although the young man considered her fears as absurd, he quietly submitted to her wishes.

After a week passed in the castle, he remarked that her fears seemed rather to increase than to diminish, at which he became so nervous that he felt compelled to ask several days of freedom.

His mother held firm as long as possible, and hoped to keep him with her, but one morning the master of hounds rushed to him.

“To horse, quickly, Lord Wilfred. A splen-

did hunt is before us. Yesterday we started, in the forest of Ever, a stag with antlers so immense that I am quite sure the like has never been seen in Flanders.”

Wilfred jumped, and clapped his hands as if he had a magic wand. He trembled with joy, and his eyes sparkled with delight.

“And what is most extraordinary,” added the huntsman, “the coat of the animal is marked with great white spots. We have tracked him, and know just where he will attempt to return to his lair. The Count, your father, for whom we had reserved the honor of so uncommon a capture, is indisposed, and cannot follow.”

Wilfred, carried away with enthusiasm, fell on his mother’s neck and passionately implored her consent, so that, in spite of her fears and distress, the Countess van Isersteen knew that she could no longer keep her son at her side.

“Go, Wilfred,” said she, with tears in her eyes, “May God guide you, is my earnest prayer.”

## CHAPTER II.

## THE HUNT.

THE young man uttered a cry of triumph.

“Bravo, bravo,” he cried, “Let them saddle Ouragan, unloose the dogs. Come, come, a middle-aged stag!”

He embraced his mother, went to his father’s room to press him once more in his arms, and hastily descended into the court-yard, where he heard the whinnying of his valiant courser, amidst the barking of the dogs, and the horns calling them to start.

He jumped in the saddle, put spurs to his horse and galloped to the gate, calling: “Follow me! To the forest of Ever. Forward, forward!”

He passed the bridge quick as lightning, rushed across the meadows, followed by a dozen huntsmen and a fiery pack of hounds, whose furious barking re-echoed across the plains.

Wilfred was happy; he smiled, drew a deep breath, and mingled his cries of joy with the frenzied barking of the bloodhounds.

After half an hour of this foolish career they neared the border of the wood. The young man was constrained, in spite of himself, to slacken

his speed, for he knew not in what direction to look for the covert of the stag. He made two huntsmen precede him to show him the road, whilst his heart beat quickly.

After going slowly through a compact wood of old trees, they reached an opening surrounded by undergrowth.

The hue and cry were heard from all quarters, the horses flinched at the spurs in their sides, the dogs barked, the hunters stood in their stirrups, leaned over their horses' necks, and flew like the wind in the tracks of the stag. The frightened animal came from the forest a few steps from them and hastened to reach the clearing.

The intoxicating passion which possessed the young Count van Isersteen to follow the stag cannot be described. His horse seemed to share the same mad passion, and required neither voice nor spur; he struck the air like a storm-cloud, his feet scarcely seemed to touch the earth.

Soon it became impossible for the dogs and most of the huntsmen to follow the young man; they remained behind, exhausted and disengaged. . . . And when the most persevering was obliged to give in, he murmured:

“God forgive me! It is not natural. Sir Wilfred is bewitched: The evil spirit leads him.”

But the young Count thought but little of his

followers. His burning eye was fixed on the stag with the white spots and the gigantic antlers; his sole hope was to obtain them. Soon he gained on the animal, and was already congratulating himself, but with one bound the stag cleared a distance that seemed almost supernatural.

Had Sir Wilfred not been blinded by passion, he would probably have asked himself if he were not the victim of an illusion, for the stag seemed to mislead him with calculation. But he was not himself: although his horse kept ahead of the others, Wilfred pushed him further, drawing blood with his spurs, and attempting the impossible.

He galloped thus, without looking back, leaving behind him mountains and valleys, dikes and ditches, copse and wood, until the perspiration rolled down his forehead, and his reeking horse was covered with a white foam.

This furious run lasted a long, long time. He had gone more than ten leagues, when he reached an unknown country whose soil seemed thrown up by an earthquake, and where everything bore traces of frightful destruction. At the farther end of a rugged plain the path the stag had evidently followed, he noticed from afar what seemed to be a mountain of rocks. But soon things took shape, as he neared the spot, and he recognized that what he had first thought a mountain was in reality the ruins of an

old castle. From the midst of the heaped-up rubbish, here and there one could see the stones of the battlements, and indeed on one side a half crumbled tower, the lower part not entirely gone. The place was completely in ruins. Weeds were growing everywhere, their creeping vines stretching even to the top of the tower.

Wilfred had only glanced at these walls. For some time he had seemed to be gaining on the stag: bursting with hope, he cruelly lashed his steed. The animal, roaring with rage, cut the air with such velocity that the young cavalier could scarcely breathe. . . . The stag was only a hundred steps from him; he tottered and seemed to lose all strength. Wilfred reached over to strike him. . . .

But, oh! heaven! The animal, drawing near the enclosure of the old castle, suddenly disappeared, as if the earth had swallowed him.

Stupefied and bewildered, Wilfred stopped his horse and rested. Finally he perceived that where the stag had disappeared was an immense opening, that seemed to extend under the earth. It was an opening into the vault of the old castle, which had without doubt here and there given way, for in the distance one could plainly see daylight. The certainty that the hunted stag had sought refuge in this cave, kindled anew his desire, and brought a smile of triumph to his lips.

He fastened his horse to a tree, in good

pasture. Determined and full of hope he penetrated into the vault. First he walked through the rubbish, stumbling more than once over immense stones, or slipping on the wet clay; soon, however, he remarked that on one side was a path beaten down by the steps of man. Was the old castle then inhabited, or was it a chance visitor like himself who had left these footprints?

Nevertheless these thoughts did not stop him: he remarked at the same time the prints of the stag's hoofs, and that of itself increased his desire to follow his prey.

About the middle of the vault, he came to a half-ruined stone stairway, which no doubt led to the remaining tower. He saw no other outlet, and felt he must either climb the steps or abandon the pursuit.

## CHAPTER III.

## “THE SORCERER NYCTOS.”

HE had scarcely gotten beyond the arch when he was perfectly dumbfounded to find himself in a large open room. All that he saw seemed inexplicable to him. On the cracked walls of the room, on the large shelves, and here and there on the floor, were scattered a number of strange things, the most of which were unknown to him—pictures representing the sun, moon, and stars, skeletons, old worn-out books, stoves, pots, phials, shoes, little wax figures, all in the greatest disorder, soiled, broken, and covered with dust and cobwebs.

But what claimed his attention most, after glancing around, was the figure of a man seated in the middle of the room. He was bending over a large book which rested on his knees, and seemed completely absorbed in what he was reading.

This statue, for so Wilfred considered it, represented an old man with hair as white as silver and a long grey beard. If the artist had put on the forehead and cheeks a little flesh-tint one would have thought the statue living, but the yellow tint of the wrinkled skin indicated clearly that there was no blood in the veins.

The young man should have considered nevertheless that this statue was an admirable imitation of nature.

Prompted by curiosity he went nearer the figure . . . but stepped back, stupefied, when he saw it turn the leaves of the book.

It was a living figure. It was still bent over the book as if profoundly absorbed in reading, and having no suspicion of the presence of a stranger.

After a moment's hesitation and silence, Wilfred raised his voice and said:

“Peace be to you, worthy man! Rushing in pursuit of a stag I have penetrated” . . .

“Blessed be those whose holy names I am unworthy to pronounce! Oh, Sir Chevalier, your arrival is an inexpressible happiness to me.” . . .

“You know me,” stammered the young man astonished. “It seems to me that I have never seen you.”

“Nor I you, sir. I have never seen you, and yet I know you better than you know yourself. You are Sir Wilfred, the only son of Foucard, Count d'Isersteen and Judith de Fleurichamp, his wife.”

“Indeed, yes; but why does my arrival make you so happy?”

At this question the old man appeared troubled, and shook his head hesitatingly.

“Is it a secret?” asked Wilfred, more and more surprised.

“A secret!” cried the old man. “Ah! yes, a secret so terrible, so awful, that my lips would refuse to reveal it, if your life did not depend on the revelation. Alas, poor unfortunate cavalier! I am going to plunge you into despair, freeze you with horror, break your heart with agony, and perhaps make you rue the hour of your birth . . . But I owe it to you—I must speak, if only out of pity, for your sad fate makes me shed tears of blood.” After finishing these words, the old man sank back on his seat and commenced to sob.

Wilfred knew neither what to believe nor what to think. Was the man crazy? What foundation was there for the dark predictions which he had just presented to him? He, however, knew his father and mother. What could be the fate that menaced him? He compassionately contemplated the old man, bathed in tears, who finally ceased sobbing, and pointing to a wooden bench, said:

“Will you sit down, sir knight? What I have to say to you is so horrible, and apparently so improbable, that I tremble with fear that you may not believe me . . . Nevertheless, you ought and must trust me, otherwise you will cause your father and mother a violent death, and you will be a prey to shame and despair, for you will pierce their hearts with your own hand . . . But I hope that the Sovereign Arbitrator will hear your mother’s prayers . . . See her now,

kneeling in the chapel d'Isersteen, with hands raised to heaven.”

The young Count looked in the direction indicated by the old man, but his eye only saw the gray walls of the cave.

“I understand,” he said, “you see my mother in spirit?”

“No, sir, I see her in reality.”

“Does my mother then know the danger which threatens me?” asked Wilfred, in great surprise.

“She does not know it: she is only greatly worried by a vague fear which I have awakened in her, so that her prayers will assist me in your deliverance. Were not her last words to you this morning that she would pray for you?”

“You can hear in this cave what is said at Isersteen?” cried the young man. “Who are you then?”

“Your father mentioned my name to you today,” answered the old man. “When you left this morning, did he not say to you in a doubtful way. ‘The spotted stag? I remember now, I have heard it spoken. It is the watch-dog of Nyctos, the sorcerer. Remain at home, Wilfred; no one can catch the beast.’ You did not listen to your father’s advice. On the contrary, his words excited you more, and I tried to inflame your passion to blindness and frenzy, so as to lead you here, and reveal to you myself this frightful truth.”

“A sorcerer? You are Nyctos, the sorcerer?” sighed Wilfred. “And you are interested in me? Why? What is there in common between us?”

“Ah, I wish to save you and your parents, the innocent victims of an enchantment, but that is not all; on your deliverance depends the salvation or eternal damnation of a soul as dear to me as my mother’s. To-day I am Nyctos, the sorcerer . . . to-morrow, if you listen to my advice, I will break with occult sciences and my culpable life . . . and will the rest of my days be a martyr. I will accept the expiation, so as to be nearer to Him whose name I am unworthy to mention.”

“Well, speak!” murmured the young Count impatiently. “Clearly explain to me what I have to fear.”

“You will believe me, Sir Chevalier?”

“I am so disposed; do you not know the most hidden things?”

“Oh! I beg of you, do not hesitate to do so, or else, as I said before, you and your parents will be condemned to the most frightful death.”

“Speak, I will believe you.”

The old man kept silence for a few minutes as if to collect his thoughts, and commenced his revelations in these words.

## CHAPTER IV.

“THE SORCERER’S SECRET.”

FOUR hours walk from here, near the sea, lies a castle inhabited for the past thirty years by Sir Ingelram de Fleurichamp.

This chivalrous warrior had a most beautiful daughter, gentle as a dove, and gifted by the Creator with every attraction of mind and body. Judith de Fleurichamp is now your mother, my Lord; she was then a young girl sought after by all the cavaliers of that country. Among those who had pretensions to her hand was a certain Evermar de Wolhout. He was a man with neither strength nor courage. The beautiful Judith, who did not love him, repelled his advances, and chose for her husband the handsome Foucard van Isersteen.

“Furious with jealousy and shame, Evermar vowed vengeance but was too weak to wrestle against the valiant Foucard, and too cowardly even to attack him. For months he made himself miserable, and every one believed that his heart would break. Finally he went to an astrologer, a friend of mine, hoping that he would give him some magical means of satisfying his vindictive hatred. The astrologer, whose name

I cannot give, had interested himself only in studying the stars and seeking the philosopher's stone; but dazzled by the brilliant offer of Sir Evermar, he allowed himself to descend to the black arts and necromancy. An ordinary vengeance would not satisfy the passionate hatred of Evermar. The death of Sir Foucard van Isersteen, his wife, and even their unborn child, would not satisfy him: their torture must be a masterpiece of cruelty . . . By what researches and mysterious inspiration of his black soul he conceived the infernal scheme he afterwards carried out, would take too long at present to relate. Be satisfied to know, Sir Wilfred, that before you were born he had resolved that as soon as your arm was strong enough to carry a sword, both father and mother should perish by a blow from your hand.”

“Oh! God in heaven, what do I hear!” cried the young knight, trembling with fright. “But they have not done so.”

“They have not,” replied the old man, shaking his head. “For many years have I sought the means to fight against their sorcery and to break the enchantment. Alas! I have not been able to prevent it.”

“Ah! I also will avenge myself,” muttered Wilfred, shaking his clenched fist. “Where does this cowardly traitor, Evermar, live?”

“The Supreme Judge has already punished him. He was torn to pieces at a hunt by his

own dogs, and his body left to the birds of the air.”

“And the treacherous sorcerer? I will compel him with my sword at his throat to withdraw the curse he has put upon me.”

“He could not do it.”

“He could not? Well, at least I will satisfy my revenge by taking his life.”

“He is . . . he also is dead,” stammered the sorcerer.

Wilfred uttered a harsh cry and let his head fall on his breast.

“All hope is not lost, Sir Knight,” said the old man. “What I am doing, what I have done every day, is to make a supreme effort to save you. Listen to what I have still to tell you. You must understand what you can do to overcome their witchcraft. Listen with attention. The Fates took possession of you during the short space of time between your birth and the moment when the regenerating water of baptism fell on your head. At that time, on a dark and stormy night, Evermar sought the astrologer, to learn from him the time of your birth; he was not at home, and more than five hours passed before their incantations commenced. Each quarter of an hour of this spell represented a year. Thus twenty years of your life was already lost to the vengeance of Evermar, but from your twentieth year to the end of your days the curse would follow you—at least so thought your enemies. Nevertheless they were mistaken.

“A few hours after your birth you were seized with the most violent convulsions, and fearing you would die, they baptized you immediately, that is to say, just one hour and fifteen minutes after the sorcerer had commenced his incantations over you.

“The result is that the spell is on you only for five years. To-day they celebrate the feast of the Holy Corneille. To-morrow, at break of day, you will reach your twentieth year, and will become a slave to your cruel fate until the day you reach your twenty-sixth year. If you could remain so long without going near your parents, then, only then, we could hope to keep your hands from shedding their blood.”

“Not see my mother, nor my father, for five years!” murmured Wilfred, with despair.

“Listen well, and imprint my words on your mind as if they were engraven there with red-hot iron,” said the old man; “if you go near your parents before the expiration of the five years, a blind passion will take immediate hold of you, and without knowing what you do, you will take their lives. You must flee, flee far from here, before you risk the danger of meeting your parents.”

“Ah, what a terrible fate,” groaned Wilfred, running his fingers through his hair. “If it is for love of my mother, I will submit. . . But what will become of my parents? When I do not return, will they not be overcome by grief?

thinking I have met with an accident in hunting.”

“They will suffer less than you.”

“Ah! you do not know my mother. But I will send a messenger to reassure her.”

“For your life, do not attempt that, my Lord!” cried the old man. “You would bring death to them and to yourself. Rest assured they would endeavor to discover your hiding place, they would seek you through the entire world . . . and perhaps would find you, only to die by your hand; for you must not forget that the power of the spell hangs over them as over you, and is working to bring you together.”

“Alas, alas! What can I do?” sighed the terrified young man.

“I repeat, fly, fly immediately as far as possible, beyond mountains and rivers, without attempting to know anything of your parents. Your deliverance is doubtful; in any case, the sole chance to avert the fate that menaces you, is to follow strictly my counsel.”

Wilfred, completely overcome, wept bitterly.

“Have courage, my Lord,” said the old man, deeply moved; “if you struggle against fate with all your strength of will, there is reason to hope you will reach your twenty-sixth year without the fatal accident. But mark what I say to you: the nearer you approach to your deliverance, the more threatening the danger becomes for you. The last month, if you avoid the trial

until then, the last month, the last day, indeed the last hour, will be the most trying. If you do not follow my counsel, if your resolution wavers for a moment, then you are lost. . . . And by your imprudent love, you will kill your parents, your poor mother whom you love so tenderly.”

“I will follow your directions, I will fly,” said the young Count in a stifled voice, “but let me breathe a little. The blow is so cruel I feel my heart will break.”

“Thanks, young man,” said the sorcerer. “Ah! I well knew it would not be in vain I would appeal to your courage. I also am going to depart—I am going far, far away, farther than you, to Rome and Jerusalem—and in weeping over the Holy Sepulchre I will pray that your soul may not be held by these impious artifices.”

The old man was silent a moment, then suddenly burst forth.

“Hasten, Sir Wilfred, to depart. A half a league from here I see a cloud of dust on the plain. Your servants, your dogs, are on your track. They gallop . . . quick, quick, to horse, and do not return; you must not meet any one who knows you.”

The young man groaned aloud, rose from his bench and slowly went towards the stairway, whilst he uttered a mute adieu. The old man followed him and whispered in a deep and threatening tone.

“Wilfred van Isersteen, would you kill your mother with your own hands? Does not your love give you strength when courage alone can avert the bloody catastrophe? Go, remain thus, cowardly and irresolute, and rush to meet your horrible fate!” . . .

These words were like a thunder-clap to the young man. In three bounds he was at the top of the stairway. He quickly seized his horse's bridle, jumped into the saddle, and putting spurs to his horse, was soon lost to view.

## CHAPTER V.

## FLIGHT.

WITHOUT Wilfred perceiving it, his horse insensibly slackened his pace. He was so lost in his stormy thoughts that it seemed as if he was weighed down by a heavy cloud.

Cursed from his birth! To kill his parents with his own hands! To shed his cherished mother's blood!

Was such a thing possible? Was he not rather the plaything of a frightful dream? Or had Nyctos, the sorcerer, chosen to mislead him by a vain hallucination? Should he leave, frightened by a false conjecture, fly from his country, and let them believe that he had been devoured by wild beasts? Would not his poor mother suffer from such a blow? Oh! if he could only clasp her once more in his arms! But to leave her without saying good-bye, with the fear of her sinking under her grief! What had he done to deserve such a fate?

Whilst he abandoned himself to these dark reveries, and drying from time to time his eyes, still red from weeping, his horse had twice taken a side road and gone in the direction of Isersteen.

Wilfred did not know that the animal, ruled

by a mysterious power, had changed his course. Great tears rolled from his eyes. The lamentations of his mother tore his heart; his imagination painted his father wringing his hands in despair. He heard his name called, as if in distress, through the woods and fields. . .

But the sound of the horn and the deafening cry of the hounds soon recalled him from his sad visions. . .

Straight ahead of him the sun was setting in the horizon; he was then traveling westward, towards Isersteen. Like a somnambulist rudely awakened he recovered his senses. . . The curse then secretly affected the horse as well as himself.

When he had thought of discrediting the curse, and returning to his mother, the animal had acted under the same influence! . . . Nevertheless God in his mercy had not abandoned him! There was yet time to fly, but not an instant to lose, because the hunter whose horn he had heard might be one of his father's servants.

These ideas had chased through Wilfred's mind with the rapidity of lightning. He had already turned his horse, and after rudely chastising him, used his spurs and took the road to the east.

He soon disappeared in the dark forest, which surrounded the country like a chain of black mountains. In hopes of eluding more easily the Isersteen people and avoiding all travellers, he

left the road and forced his horse to make a path for himself through the thick branches and shrubbery. Finally he dismounted and led his horse for more than an hour.

Night began to fall under; the thickly arched trees it was already so dark that Wilfred was obliged to stop and ask himself how he could pass the night in this wild solitude. Some minutes of daylight still remained, so he profited by them to discover a mossy place in which to rest his tired horse.

He heard from afar, and then nearer, the howling of the wolves and, perhaps, the growling of the bears. Would he be obliged to defend himself against these wild beasts? A simple hunting knife was the only weapon that he possessed . . . The thought that he could climb a tree and remain there until daylight gave him a sense of security—but his horse! without doubt, the poor beast would be torn to pieces if left to his melancholy fate.

Fortunately, Wilfred, like all good hunters, carried in his pocket a flint, a piece of steel and some tinder, and knew that a burning fire would drive away all wild beasts.

So with feverish activity he picked up a few dry leaves and broken branches. For a long time he tried to light a fire . . . Whilst he was angrily striking the flint, he could hear the howling of the wolves and the deep growls of the bears becoming more distinct; already he could

distinguish their footsteps through the forest when, O happiness! his fire was lighted, and there was a deep silence . . . The first danger was overcome, since wild beasts are only dangerous in the darkness of night, and he now had time to take precautions to protect himself from their attacks.

He immediately began to fence himself around with branches, and to collect dry wood. He made three fires, at short distances apart;—so that he had soon placed his horse and himself in a kind of burning fortress, the brightness of which kept away the animals.

When he had accomplished this hard work, night was already advanced, and the forest resounded on all sides with the cries of beasts, seeking their prey.

Wilfred seated himself near the middle fire, with his knife on his knees, ready to defend himself against all attacks. But, after waiting some time, convincing himself there was nothing to fear, he threw some fresh branches on the fires, and forgetting his immediate danger, thought only of his miserable fate and sad future.

What was he going to do now? He must wander in strange countries; condemned for five years to a frightful exile, as he could have no news of his parents. He was then deprived of all consolation. How could he live?

In his hurry to start for the hunt, he had forgotten to put any silver in his purse. Neverthe-

less, he could not beg, nor could he offer his services to any nobleman, as he would be obliged to remain his own master, so as to wander from country to country, to avoid betraying his secret, and so remain unknown.

At last, after long and painful reflections, a sad smile played about his lips, as he murmured to himself:

“Troubadours and poets are welcomed everywhere, and received with joy in all the boroughs and castles. Lords and ladies esteem it an honor to protect art and poetry, and frequently make handsome presents to those who have entertained them.” . . .

“They have always flattered me until now, that I was a good troubadour; I know some beautiful stories, and I am well versed in this pleasing art. It is an inspiration from heaven. I will become a troubadour. I will entertain knights and noble ladies with my songs, accompanied by my lute, so I can wander all over the world without being in want.”

He passed the night revolving this in his mind, and thinking over his future. The thought of his parents' grief brought bitter tears to his eyes, and daybreak found him in the same place, plunged in thought. The night-birds had at last ceased their frightful concert, and sought their lairs. Then only did Wilfred dare to close his eyes. Overcome by a fatigue which was mental as well as physical, he fell into a

profound sleep, which, however, was heavy, and troubled by frightful dreams.

The morning was well advanced when he awoke with a shudder, examining his hands to see if they were stained with blood. He had dreamed that in a passion of blind rage he had strangled his parents and thrown their mutilated bodies into the castle moat.

He tried several times to drive away this frightful vision. Little by little he realized his position.

As soon as he had bridled his horse he led him through the underwood, towards the northeast. His heart ached, he sighed frequently, and raised his sad eyes to heaven, as if to testify to his great misery.

After pursuing for more than an hour this laborious path through the bushes, he saw an open road. Mounting his horse he spurred him on, and still more encouraged him by his voice, to hasten as much as possible his melancholy flight.

## CHAPTER VI.

## “THE WANDERING TROUBADOUR.”

The sun had not attained more than half of its power, when Wilfred, leaving the forest, saw before him a vast plain, crossed by a beautiful river of limpid waters.

He noticed in the distance a tall square tower which arose from the midst of a number of houses. This was without doubt a large city. He could perhaps find here all that was necessary to commence his life as a troubadour.

On questioning the first person that he met, he found that the city was Harlebek, on the river Lys.

It was not without fear and precaution that Wilfred approached this stronghold of the powerful Count of Flanders. If the Count was holding court, the young man would, without doubt, meet some knights who had perhaps seen him in a tournament at Isersteen. Had he not better remain without the walls until twilight, so as not to be so easily recognized?

Acting on this idea he remained in the suburbs and stopped before the first respectable inn that he saw.

After ordering a frugal meal and a bottle of

wine, he mentioned to the innkeeper that he wished to sell his horse. The innkeeper had admired the noble animal, tired as he was, and offered him a price far below his value, which Wilfred nevertheless accepted.

That evening he entered the city, sold to a rich Lombard his handsome hunting-knife, his golden spurs, coat of mail, and all his other articles pertaining to chivalry, and bought at the same time some clothes more suitable to the peaceful appearance of a troubadour, also a mandolin or small harp, to accompany himself in singing.

Then returning to his inn, he slept until the crowing of the cock, barking of the dogs, and passing on the streets, awoke him.

He once more returned to the stables, caressed his horse and bade him good-bye, with tears in his eyes and a breaking heart.

Without returning to the city, he crossed to the other side of the river in a small boat. The deed was done—the sacrifice made. Heaving a deep sigh and raising his eyes to heaven, he began his wanderings around the world as a troubadour.

When he was received into a castle, and sang in a pure and touching voice his songs and ballads, he was always welcomed, and frequently pressed to remain several weeks.

But knights and ladies did not always offer him the same hospitality, sometimes they even

rudely refused him entrance to the castle—the Lord was absent, or they were indisposed for gaiety. These rude receptions wounded him so deeply, that whilst his money lasted he would always pass the night in some village inn.

Finally, however, he was reduced to his last piece of silver. No matter what and how he felt, he was obliged to go from castle to castle, like other troubadours, singing and playing on his harp, to gain his bread . . . and whatever welcome he received, or however little attention they paid him, even sending him away with empty hands, he was obliged to receive it all with good grace.

Such humiliations to his proud soul, the perpetual fear of seeing the curse accomplished, the remembrance of his dear parents, and the thought of their mortal sorrow, saddened his brow and lessened his courage.

He wandered thus for several months, with no other end but getting as far as possible from Isersteen and his parents, crossing countries nearly deserted, and remaining unknown to everybody.

After passing several days in inhospitable castles, where he had scarcely anything to eat, he entered a small city, hoping to be a little happier there.

Indeed, they were celebrating the wedding of the Margravine van Arlen with the Chevalier van Wiltz, and they promised handsome presents.

to all troubadours who could show imagination and skill.

Although hesitating and full of fear, Wilfred presented himself at the feast. When his turn came he sang so beautiful a song in praise of ladies in general, and particularly the noble fiancee, that they honored him with praises and thanks.

But at this moment an old knight arose from the table at the other end of the room, and studying the triumphant troubadour, his countenance betrayed a lively surprise.

Imagine Wilfred's terror in recognizing Lord van Hoogstade, a friend of his father's. He became pale and trembled as the old Chevalier drew near him and reproached him bitterly.

“What are you doing here? Ah! unhappy man! Do not look at me in astonishment; you are Wilfred van Isersteen!”

“I, Wilfred van Isersteen,” stammered the young man, bowing his head.

“What! Are you a perfectly heartless, ungrateful and unfeeling son?” continued the knight. “You here enjoying yourself at a feast, singing, praised, and made much of, whilst your parents believe you dead, and languish in the most bitter sorrow.”

The troubadour's eyes filled with great tears, but noticing that every one was looking at him he remembered his danger, and, conquering his emotions, answered in a low tone:

“Yes, Lord van Hoogstade, I am Wilfred van Isersteen. What you see me doing now is to accomplish a vow, and if I fail I must die. I will explain this terrible secret to you this evening after the fête. I am to sleep at the castle. Do not let us interfere with these ceremonies. Say that you were mistaken; you shall know all.”

The knight silently returned to his place, but seemed much worried.

To those who questioned him, he answered that he believed he had recognized the troubadour, but was deceived by a remarkable resemblance.

From that moment it seemed to Wilfred that the ground burned his feet. What would he not have given to be miles away? But he saw that Lord Van Hoogstade kept his eyes fixed on him. He must then hide his fright and impatience, if he did not wish to be betrayed.

Other troubadours then chanted their ballads and songs, after which the chatelaine gave orders for them all to be taken to a large room near the kitchen, and served with old wine and a good repast.

Wilfred followed his companions without showing the least haste, for, as he left the room, he silently bowed to every one.

The meal was served, and although Wilfred was hungry, he could not eat a mouthful. Fear made him feverish, and on his return to Flanders

would not Lord van Hoogstade mention where he had met him? And had not Nyctos the sorcerer said the curse would fall, if his parents were to receive news of him? Alas! alas! could this be true? Could he shed his own mother's blood?

He took a daring step: in spite of his trouble of mind, he pretended to feel a little indisposed, and to feel the need of fresh air.

He went out, and for some minutes promenaded up and down with an indifferent air, each time drawing nearer the large door, which he found open, until finally he crossed the drawbridge . . . He was free! because he suddenly found himself in the midst of a large park of trees and thick bushes.

He suddenly changed his course, and disappeared in the thick shade of the trees. If they noticed his disappearance, they would surely follow him, as Lord van Hoogstade would tell every one his name and the supposed wrongs of his unhappy parents. If he was captured, they would probably send him forcibly to Flanders . . . And then, O heaven! then he would become his parents' murderer.

Weighed down by these frightful thoughts, Wilfred pursued his way like some wild beast tracked by the hunter, seeking the woody paths and tearing his face and hands against the branches of the trees, perspiring, panting, and blowing, until finally his strength being ex-

hausted, he took refuge in a cave, where he fell, more than half dead.

When he awoke, after sleeping several hours, he saw the moon, then full, shedding its white light on the trees and woods. He started again, not knowing where he was nor in which direction his steps were leading him; he only hoped that he was going far from the fatal castle where the old Lord had recognized him, and that they would not be able to follow him. Indeed, he had not seen nor followed a regular path, and had passed neither castle nor cabin. He now found himself in a flat and sterile country; there were no signs of cultivation, the land was intersected here and there by rocky ravines through which flowed streams or rivers.

During his nocturnal walk he had noticed wolves' eyes glaring in the moonlight, but that did not disturb him, knowing that these animals are cowardly and weak when alone, particularly in summer, and that the slightest noise would put them to flight; he had only to touch the harp strings, to rid himself of these unpleasant travelling companions. In the morning he met a band of falcon-hunters, who made him sing them several songs, and gave him some bread and roasted lamb to eat. He slept for several hours and then commenced anew his painful journey through this abandoned and deserted country.

Towards evening he noticed a little hut in a

cleft alongside a torrent, and as there was smoke coming from the chimney, he knew he would find some human beings.

He descended from rock to rock in a steep gorge, and found an old man and old woman working in a little kitchen garden, which they had made beside the torrent.

“Good people,” said he, “I am an unfortunate traveller, a poor troubadour lost in this wild country. For the love of God, be merciful to me. I am dying of fatigue and hunger. Allow me to rest, and give me something to eat, and I will repay you by giving you the only valuable thing which I possess.”

At these words, he drew from his pocket a knife, the handle of which was of silver, chased with gold, and held it towards the old man.

He and his wife regarded it with astonishment and curiosity; the man examined particularly the emblems engraved on the handle.

“Three falcons of gold on a field of azure?” murmured he, “you are then a noble knight, my Lord?”

This question made Wilfred fear. He could scarcely hide his agitation in answering:

“No, this knife was given me by a knight, and I offer it to you now, in exchange for a little bread.”

“It seems to me that I have seen this coat of arms,” said the man, knitting his brows, whilst Wilfred grew pale with anxiety, watching him.

“Yes, I remember: it was at Lille, in Flanders. It was more than thirty years ago. A knight bearing the three golden falcons on his shield, bore away the prize in tournament. I was then a servant and valet-at-arms of the noble Count de Chiny . . . Wait a minute . . . What did my master call the victor of the tournament? Ah! I have it: his name was Foucard van Isersteen. Do you know him?”

Wilfred muttered an unintelligible reply.

“You are pale, my Lord!” cried the man. Why do my words make you tremble?”

“Ah! it is grief for the dead!” stammered the young man. “Sir Foucard van Isersteen was my generous patron . . . He died before my eyes from an accident whilst hunting.”

“Why weep? Are we not all obliged to pay that great debt? . . . Here, take back your knife—I do not want it. The little that I have I will cheerfully divide with you. Enter my house and accept my humble hospitality.”

They immediately served him with some bread, a kind of gruel, and then some cheese, as the poor always own a goat. He devoured this miserable repast with a tremendous appetite; his eyes brightened with pleasure, and he thanked his host effusively. But the abundant nourishment which he had just taken affected him so, that it made him heavy, and his eyes soon closed from sleep.

The old people took him into another room,

and gave him their own bed, inviting him to rest on it. Wilfred threw himself on it half dressed, and slept, not waking until after sunrise.

How happy he would be if he could only remain in this hut! But his father's name had been spoken there; the man would become suspicious, ask questions, and probably discover his secret. The whip of his unrelenting fate again chased him away, and notwithstanding the old people's persuasions to remain, he wished to continue his journey.

He asked which direction he should take to traverse the most deserted part of the country. They told him the north. He again pressed his hosts' hands in expressing to them his great gratitude, slung his lyre across his shoulder, and climbed the ravine in order to regain the plain.

The first thing that he did, on finding himself alone, was to erase the crest from the handle of his knife, by rubbing it with a piece of stone, and thus efface the last trace of his birth. He reflected on what had happened to him during the last two days, and concluded that a mysterious power led and prompted him to go to places where his secret could be betrayed. But he remembered at the same time, thank heaven! that another power had sustained and protected him so far against the influence of the curse. He started again on his sorrowful journey, a little more encouraged, and kept on without interrup-

tion until night, and found lodgings in a cabin belonging to some charcoal-burners.

Towards the close of the second day, feeling very much fatigued, he felt the desire to procure a little better nourishment than that of the country people.

There suddenly arose before him against a steep rock the towers and walls of a fortified castle, which had been hidden from his view by the hills.

A river flowed at the base of the castle, and on its banks were some rustic houses, showing their stubble roofs and clay walls.

At this sight, Wilfred was encouraged to try his success as a troubadour. In this fortress, perched like an eagle's nest on the top of a rock, in a wild country, he would not run the risk of meeting men who would recognize him. Perhaps the Lord of the castle, if he was hospitable and charitable, would not only give him a substantial repast, but several days' refuge. . . . But if on the contrary he found humiliation and disdain? . . . In any case he would risk nothing by trying. To support any longer so miserable a life, seemed impossible.

## CHAPTER VII.

## THE CASTLE OF ROTSBURG.

IN collecting his thoughts he drew near the large causeway cut in the rock, which by a circuitous way led to the castle. Whilst hesitating, not knowing whether to ascend or not, he saw, far above him on the rocks, a man clothed in green. He stopped him and asked the name of the castle and by whom it was occupied.

“It is Rotsburg,” he answered, “the residence of Sir Gouthier de Rotsburg, whose huntsman I am.”

“Is he at the castle?”

“Certainly; he is at table, he has company.”

“Will he hospitably welcome a troubadour?”

“Joyfully, if the singer is really an artist: because Sir Gouthier is an amateur, well versed in the arts of trouvère himself, and his daughter, our noble Lady Basilissa, will give you both meat and drink for a beautiful song, or even a pretty story. You are just in time, sir; we have very distinguished company, and as they have only finished dinner they will be in the mood to empty their glasses; and as wine and song go well together, come with me and I will announce you to my master.”

Wilfred followed him into the castle and waited in the ante-chamber. The huntsman soon returned, and told him that Sir Gauthier would permit him to entertain his guests by his songs.

The young man entered the banquet hall; bowing profoundly, he waited silently for a command from the Lord, during which time he closely scanned the party, which was composed of about seven or eight knights, all pretty well advanced in years.

They all seemed happy, and as they still held their well-filled glasses in their hands, it was to be supposed that the noble juice of the grape had warmed their heads and rejoiced their hearts. One of them appeared more excited than the others.

Two cup-bearers stood, with flagons in their hands, ready to fill the glasses at the first sign from their master.

“Well, sir singer, do you know any good songs?” asked Sir Gouthier de Rotsburg.

“The gracious Lord and his noble guests shall judge whether my humble skill is worthy of their approbation: I will do my best,” replied Wilfred.

“Commence then, and let us hear you.”

After tuning his harp, the young man began a chant whose soft melody and melancholy air brought a look of discontent on the faces of his audience.

The knight with the red cheeks was particularly displeased, and grumbled.

“This is not a song calculated to brighten your hearers!” . . .

But he soon became quiet, as the penetrating voice of the troubadour soothed him as well as his companions. There was something touching and enchanting in the plaintive sweetness of the song as it fell from the minstrel’s lips. It was as follows:

#### THE TROUBADOUR’S PRAYER.

“How beautiful it must be to lead the life of a hero, to struggle against violence and injustice, and to accomplish great feats of arms. The bow cannot always be bent. When we have hunted, struggled and fought all day, music and song must have their turn. So I tune my lute to sing my best, before these noble cavaliers. But if my voice is sad, be not surprised, as the bitterness of my soul finds expression in my songs.

#### II.

“O you who hear me so compassionately, excuse the poet who disturbs your gaiety. I wish to drive away my trouble to please you. My heart longs for solace and brightness: but my deep sorrow evinces itself in spite of me, in my songs. In order to hope still, I seek new strength in the expression of my own grief: my afflicted heart finds fresh consolation in my plaintive accents.”

There was a moment’s silence: the gentlemen looked at each other to explain the curious impression produced on them by these stanzas. It

had thrown a cloud over them, they had nevertheless heard it with mingled pleasure and admiration.

“Sir, your voice is beautiful, you are a charming artist,” said Sir Gouthier, “but do you not know something brighter and livelier.”

“Indeed,” said the red-cheeked knight, “a funeral song is perhaps very beautiful, but there is nothing bright about it—it is only good to put us in the ground.”

“Do not allow the words of my good friend, Sir Adalbert de Mirewart to wound you,” said the Lord of the castle. “His intentions are good, and he has a noble and generous heart.”

“I am very unhappy, and I have great sorrow,” replied Wilfred; “but my lute shall give forth a brighter air.”

“That will never do! That will never do!” said Sir Adalbert laughing. “Ah! I understand: the singer is thirsty. Pour him out some wine, and let him drink several glasses, and I am certain he will find himself more disposed to gaiety.”

The page presented to him a well-filled cup; he drank it with real pleasure, and felt as if fire had been poured through his veins. He was about to return the cup, when Sir Adalbert cried: “Again! again!” until Wilfred had emptied the cup three times.

“What do the noble Lords wish now?” asked the young man, whose eyes sparkled, as he

played a prelude of a few chords on his lute: “A love song or a pretty story?”

“A love song,” responded the Lord.

“No, a drinking song: a eulogy on wine!” cried Sir Adalbert.’

“Yes, sir, yes; a eulogy on wine,” repeated the others.”

“Well, I will satisfy your friendly desire,” said Wilfred.

And he sang in an energetic voice a joyous song, the chorus of which was repeated by them all as they clinked their glasses. Sir Adalbert approached the singer and took him by the hand, saying that if he wished to come to the Castle of Mirewart, he would be welcomed with joy and richly recompensed.

All expressed their admiration of Wilfred’s talent and wished to thank him, urging him to drink more wine, which he refused, saying he would much prefer something to eat, as he had not eaten since morning.

“Why did you not say so, my charming singer?” cried Sir Gouthier. “Now you will have to wait a little while, and gain your dinner by another song and another fable.— My daughter Basilissa adores music and singing. She must hear you. Tune your lute; I am going to find her, and at the same time to give orders to the cook to prepare you a good supper immediately.”

A few minutes later Sir Gouthier returned, leading his daughter by the hand.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## BASILISSA.

SHE was a marvel of beauty: the fresh clear look from her clear blue eyes, and the engaging smile of her lips, gave her the naive grace of a child, though the stateliness of her carriage showed that she had attained at least eighteen years of age.

“Basilissa,” said her father, “here is a charming singer. He touches the heart so deeply that the accents of his voice, now sweet and caressing, now strong and bold, make you forget the world entirely. I wish you could have heard him praise the wine foaming in the glasses.”

“I heard it from afar, my dear father,” she answered. “Ah! how it touched me: the tones penetrated into my very heart.”

Perhaps the wine made the young man forget for the moment his sorrows and the bitterness of his fate, because he answered the young girl’s flattering words:

“God be thanked for having brought me to this castle, where beat hearts ennobled not only by birth, but still more so, by their kindness and love of art. O Lady, what more precious recompence could a poor troubadour receive here be-

low, than thanks from a mouth so gracious, so kind, so—”

The words died on his lips. He feared that she had seen, from the boldness of his speech, that he was not an ordinary troubadour. If his song had touched the young girl, the sweet and sympathetic voice of Basilissa made a much more profound impression on him.

“Will the gentle troubadour sing something for me?” asked Basilissa, looking at the young man with so charming a smile that he trembled.

“Command, noble lady; it will give me great happiness to obey your wishes.”

“I do not wish to command, I only address you in a simple prayer.”

She went and sat by her father, saying:

“Father, will not the troubadour remain some days at Rotsburg?”

“It is my intention to invite him to stay until after the great hunt, when we will have many guests.”

“He is well brought up, and speaks gracefully; do you not think so, father? We are not often honored by such artists at Rotsburg.”

“No, I am astonished to see him here. He is unhappy and in great trouble, he says. If his first song meant anything, he is an exile from his country. Why? But listen, he is playing a prelude.”

Indeed, Wilfred began to sing a strange song, which seemed to come from the bottom of

his heart: because he made numerous allusions to the noble and charming young lady, whose sweet smile had so touched him.

He sang in a deep and melodious voice this ballad, the refrain of which was:

“The most peaceful and the sweetest  
thing on earth is a woman’s smile.”

Basilissa was in dreamland; she could not remove her eyes from the handsome singer, and seemed to cling to the words as they fell from his lips. Wilfred had already stopped, nevertheless she seemed to be still listening. She was drawn away from her reverie by her father’s friends, who surrounded her, and who loudly applauded the singer.

The wine had aroused the courtesy of the old Cavaliers. “His songs have nothing exaggerated about them,” they said; “but if this was true of women in general, how much more the case when inspired by the smile of the beautiful Basilissa, which could be truly pronounced the sweetest thing in the world.”

The young girl accepted these flatteries with a child-like pleasure; she seemed very happy, and continued to praise the troubadour.

Meanwhile the servants had set the table for Wilfred, who being very hungry, sat down before supper was served.

“Father,” said Basilissa, “should I not exercise the duties of hospitality towards the trouba-

dour? There is no one with him but the servants” . . .

“Oh! oh! young lady!” said one of the old knights. “A troubadour? Take care: he is not nobly born!”

“Perhaps, Sir Gérull,” answered she; “but has not God ennobled him by giving him talents so beautiful?”

“Ennobled? not altogether, Basilissa,” answered her father; “art however certainly raises a man above the common herd. Go, my child, pay him the honors which he deserves.”

The young girl went to the poet, served him, poured out the wine, and invited him to eat, so showing Wilfred and the servants that art and artists were appreciated and honored at Rotsburg.

Wilfred was so lost in admiration of his charming hostess, that he could not think of eating. At first he looked at her, but was soon obliged to lower his eyes, because the young girl’s gaze, in spite of its angelic purity, made his heart beat violently.

His repast was almost finished, when Basilissa suddenly said to him:

“Sir, my father will invite you to pass several days with us: you will accept, will you not?”

“Oh, with joy, with great happiness,” answered the young man.

“We will remember you and your beautiful songs for a long time at Rotsburg. Will you let us know your name? Tell it me, I beg you.”

“My name!” stammered the young man; “my name, Lady.”

“Yes, what is your name?”

“Ah, do not ask it!”

“Why? You wish to remain unknown, to escape the renown which is due you? But I wish to know: you grieve me in refusing.”

“I am called . . . I am called Wilfred,” answered the young man sighing, as if afraid of his own words.

“Wilfred?” joyfully repeated the young girl, “oh! what a pretty name! I had a brother called Wilfred, but alas! he died a hero, serving the Emperor. God rest his soul! . . . and after, sir, after?”

“After?” repeated the troubadour, anxiously.

“Yes, where were you born? What is your father’s name?”

“Be merciful!” murmured Wilfred, “an inviolable secret rests on me. I cannot tell you who I am, nor from whence I come. Do not ask it of me, and I will bless and thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

And he raised his hands to her in a supplianting manner, as his eyes filled with tears.

“As you wish,” answered Basilissa, astonished, and showing a little discontent. “I will respect your secret. Now I must to my father, and I trust that Sir Wilfred will give us some new sample of his talents.”

The young man remained much longer at the

table. When he had finished his supper, his head fell on his breast, and he seemed to be absorbed by gloomy reflections. Did he regret having given his first name? or did he fear that the young girl's irresistible charms would lead him to dangerous revelations?

Sir Adalbert de Mirewart roused him.

“Hello, sir singer,” said he, “it is not yet time to sleep. Relate something, if you please, some chivalrous adventure, some feat of arms. Do you know the story of Godreon?”

“Yes, sir,” answered Wilfred, “I know the touching story of Godreon, and many others besides.”

“Well, tell us some of them, sir; and so as not to tire yourself too much in speaking, come to the table and take a seat.”

The troubadour obeyed, seating himself in front of the old Lord and his daughter.

He commenced to relate how Godreon, the beautiful fiancée of Herwig was captured by the son of King Hartmoed . . . She refused to accept him for a husband, and was condemned for a year to do the coarse and repugnant work of a servant. Her firmness and fidelity to Herwig were at last recompensed; her brothers conquered the son of Hartmoed, delivered her from slavery, and restored her triumphantly to the arms of her fiancée.

He had recited this story, sometimes in prose and sometimes in verse, sustaining his voice by

accompanying himself on the lute, but always with deep sentiment, and poetical coloring. His hearers were spellbound: Basilissa was deeply touched by the sufferings of the beautiful Godreon. Tears of pity flowed from her eyes.

“Come, come! young man,” cried Sir Adalbert, “something gayer, more amusing—something to make us laugh.”

Then Wilfred related the strange history of Carl the Great, Emperor of Elegast, the thief who made his Sovereign go stealing with him; then the story of the bears of Wisselau, then that of the Chevalier Roland, who perished so miserably in the war against the Infidels. It was evident to everybody that the young man could not, in spite of his efforts, remain gay. In all that he said or sang, there was a sadness which the knights attributed to the sorrows which he mentioned in his first song.

Worn out by the long walk he had taken since morning, and fatigued by the recitals and songs, Wilfred expressed a wish to go to rest. The old Lord called a servant to show his guest to his room.

As the old knights were to leave next morning, they bade him good-by, each in turn inviting him to come to his castle, and promising him a hearty welcome.

Basilissa looked at him, her eyes dimmed by tears.

“Ah! how good and generous you are to me,

gentlemen, and you, noble lady,” sighed Wilfred, much moved. “I am very much exhausted, nevertheless I wish in saying good-bye to you to give you something gay. Give me my lute, I will sing you the

“TROUBADOUR’S GOODNIGHT.”

And he sang them a song, the refrain of which was:

“On a northern tower  
Resounds the guard’s horn,  
Day is fleeting  
God watch o’er you,  
Chevaliers, good night.”

And as he left then, Basilissa and the gentlemen repeated the chorus:

“Beautiful singer, good night.”

## CHAPTER IX.

## LOVE.

THE first light of day was shining in the east, when Wilfred was awakened by the noise of horses neighing in the court yard. He remembered that the old knights were going to start before daylight. No doubt Sir Gouthier de Rotsburg was still in bed.

As it was yet almost dark, and the young man felt very much fatigued, he turned his head on his pillow and tried to sleep; but was not successful, as he dreamed of his awful situation and the menacing circumstances of the evening before. He arose, dressed, and fell on a chair near the head of his bed, and was soon lost in deep thought. What had he dreamed during his sleep?

The remembrance was not even clear in his mind; what he did know, was that Basilissa's face and sweet smile was before his eyes the whole night. Why did the remembrance of this smile, which was but a dream after all, cause him so much trouble?

Was this love? But he had only seen the young girl for a few minutes.

And in her childish simplicity, she had wished

to honor the singer, whose talent had so charmed her, so had been friendly to him.

She could have no sympathy with a man whose birth she believed to be obscure . . . But where had his thoughts carried him? All ideas of love were denied him, who was obliged to be an unknown wanderer on the face of the earth, and must even break the slightest ties of friendship. A smile played about his mouth, he laughed at his own emotions as childish . . . But he immediately shuddered with apprehension. Basilissa's sweet face was always before him; her voice always ringing in his ear, and his heart beat rapidly at the thought of her irresistible grace.

But, O awful doubt! Perhaps he had been ensnared to Rotsburg by the power of the curse which weighed on him, in order to accomplish his fall.

What must he do? He must not hesitate; he must fly immediately—leave Rotsburg and recommence his miserable wandering life.

He rose and walked rapidly to and fro, groaning all the time. The sun was already quite high, but no noise was heard but the barking of the dogs; no doubt the inmates of the castle were still asleep.

Wilfred left his room, and descended a stone stairway to a green terrace which had a balustrade, also of stone, from which there was a view of the surrounding country.

This view was exceedingly picturesque, and the young man could not tear himself away from the contemplation of the beautiful landscape.

He was torn by conflicting emotions: a strong desire to accept the generous hospitality offered him at Rotsburg, and so remain near this charming Basilissa, and the fear of exposing her to a peril much greater, because unknown.

At last he took an energetic resolution.

"I will leave," he said, "midday must not find me at Rotsburg."

This resolution drew from him a profound sigh, and just as he was about to tear himself away, he fell into a deep reverie.

## CHAPTER X.

## INDECISION.

HE was suddenly roused by the sound of a sweet voice. Basilissa was beside him, and her enchanting smile caused him to shudder.

“Did the charming singer sleep well?” she asked. “No, probably, since I find him here so early in the morning.”

“Thanks to your hospitality, noble Lady, I passed a good night. I am going to say good morning to his Lordship, your father” . . .

“No, sir,” said she, restraining him by a gesture, “my father is up perhaps, but not yet down stairs. Let us be seated: I wish to tell you of my dream. If it could be realized, I would thank heaven, my father, and you above all, Master Wilfred.”

The young man obeyed, stammering:

“I am listening. The dreams of a sweet noble young girl like you, must be as charming as the most beautiful poetry.”

“Ah! ah! sir, you have, no doubt frequented the courts of princes, you know how to flatter so well. My dream was without doubt beautiful; but for me alone. Listen: I dreamed that my father had invited you to remain here a long

time, and that you had accepted his hospitality; that my father desired me to take lessons in singing and on the harp from you, and that you taught me your beautiful songs, with an admirable patience. I was seated beside you, listening with a charmed attention. I worked so hard, that I could finally unite my voice with yours, and we sang so sweetly together, that my father shed tears of joy. But at last, alas!” . . .

“But at last?” repeated Wilfred with a sort of terror.

“But at last, to my grief, you left us. That was natural, was it not? I would have given a great deal to have taken lessons from you for several months; but you could not remain longer at Rotsburg, you were obliged to go away. My father paid you well, and gave you beautiful new clothes, you were contented; but strange to say, in my dream I cried like a child, when I saw you disappear behind the rock below. . . . What do you say to this dream, sir?”

Wilfred kept his eyes fixed on the young girl, even after she had finished speaking. He heard her attentively; not only what she said, but the mere sound of her voice enchanted him like the most heavenly music.

“Ah! my dream will be realized, the beginning at least; is it not so, sir?”

“Impossible, impossible!” sighed the young man.

“How so? Did I hear you aright?” she cried with sad surprise. “You will refuse to teach me your beautiful art?”

“It would not only be a great honor, but it would be a great happiness for me; but I must go, I really must.”

“Leave, O heaven!”

“To-day, even.”

“But yesterday you promised to remain!”

“Yes, but your generous welcome, and perhaps your amiability, made me forget my hard duty. I am the victim of a cruel fate, which makes me say good-bye to you to-day; and no matter what regrets I may have, I must obey.”

“My beautiful dream then is only a vain illusion!” groaned Basilissa.

“Alas, yes. Believe me I am distressed, but unable to do as you wish.”

“And I, who came to you so early, to find this only an idle dream! . . . detain you against your will . . . but there still remains one hope.”

“Abandon it, I beg of you: it can never be realized.” . . .

“We will see, sir. I am only a weak girl, and do not know how to make you feel that you are acting badly in not keeping your promise; but my father is eloquent, his words will have more weight with you.”

“More weight with me!” muttered Wilfred in a low, trembling voice; “what can have more

weight with me than the smile of a noble lady who” . . .

“Sir, will you follow me,” interrupted Basilissa, “it is time for my father to be coming down. Wait, there is Rigaud, the butler, coming to announce breakfast.”

Wilfred followed her into the breakfast room, where they found Sir Gouthier already seated at table.

“Good morning, Sir Singer,” said he to the young man, who bowed to him. “Did you sleep well? Yes—I am happy to hear it. Our friends left this morning at daybreak. We are here alone, and can amuse ourselves chatting and singing. Basilissa, bring a chair, so as to have our guest at table with us. Whilst at Rotsburg he must consider himself one of the family.”

Basilissa obeyed, serving the troubadour’s breakfast, saying sadly:

“Father, we are mistaken in our wishes. Master Wilfred must leave us to-day.”

“What? What does this mean?” cried Sir Gouthier with an incredulous laugh. “Did you not tell me yesterday that the troubadour had joyfully accepted our invitation to remain some days?”

“Yes, father, but he has changed his mind; he wishes to leave.”

“Leave? Impossible. Is my daughter telling the truth, sir?”

“Yes, my Lord, I deeply regret being obliged to refuse your generous offer. I am under the power of a tyrannical destiny, and when it commands, I must obey.”

“Let us breakfast, sir,” said Sir Gouthier, with a shade of displeasure. This unexpected news must not spoil our appetites. Later, we will speak more seriously, sir; but if you hope to leave, you will be mistaken, . . . at least, unless you have more potent reasons to give than these vague words.”

There was a long silence. Basilissa seemed very sad: she kept her eyes down, and sighed frequently. Wilfred suffered cruelly at the thought of his refusal afflicting the noble young girl who had given him so kind a welcome, especially as she thought him only a humble poet of obscure birth.

When breakfast was over, Sir Gouthier continued:

“Since yesterday evening, sir, I hardly know what to think of you. Whence comes this pre-occupation? I do not understand it: your talent does not explain it. You inspire me with a strange interest—I would like to do something for you. Excuse then, my importunity, it is only my sympathy for you. You do not seem to me to be an ordinary troubadour. Your language, your actions, something about you, makes me think you nobly born. Am I mistaken in my suppositions?”

Wilfred, foreseeing this question, had time to prepare for it.

“Your supposition is a great honor to me, but it is without foundation, my Lord,” answered he, apparently very calm. “My father is a worthy man, who makes a living in commerce. In my childhood I had the best masters, and since have frequented castles, and even courts, so that I have adopted, perhaps, their manners of speech and action.”

The young man was obliged to exert himself to so great an extent in order to dissimulate thus, that his breast heaved with sighs.

“Very well, sir, I believe you: but will you then explain to me what you meant by these words of your first song:

“‘I must wander like one.’

“You do not answer me? I understand you are an exile. Justly or not—naturally I do not know—you are exiled from your country. Well, sir, yesterday I realized that you are an unhappy man, and have had much sorrow. Explain to me the cause of your banishment. I am powerful, and have many friends, even at the Emperor’s Court. I will make every effort to have you relieved from this proscription.”

“Thanks for the generous protection which you offer me, my Lord,” said Wilfred, “but you are mistaken. I am not an exile.”

“What have you done, then? My mind re-

fuses to believe that you could be guilty of any crime in your own country.”

“Ah! you are right, my Lord!” cried Wilfred, much moved. “I have never, knowingly, injured any one.”

“Then, why fly from your country? Why wander like one accused? Why not let us, who wish it, be your friends, know your name and who you are? You doubt our sincerity, since you refuse us your confidence?”

The young man was a prey to the most frightful tortures. He had so resolved to guard his secret, that the sorrowful and supplicating look fixed on him by Basilissa shocked him.

“I am, perhaps, making a fatal mistake,” he replied, “but your goodness, my Lord, overcomes my resolutions. I cannot tell you everything. Know only, that a cruel, terrible fate, awaits me. If you wish it, think I am acting under a promise, a vow, an oath, or a charm; but the truth is, that for five years I must remain unknown. If my birthplace or my name is discovered, I will die a frightful death. Inexorable fate has ordained it, and nothing can prevent its execution.”

“Ah! poor young man,” cried Basilissa, growing pale. “How unhappy he is! . . . And he has never done a wrong to any one.”

“Never!”

Sir Gouthier bowed his head in a thoughtful manner, but made no observation.

“Do you understand now, my Lord,” asked Wilfred, “why, in spite of your persuasions, I must refuse to reveal to you this secret on which my life depends?—why yesterday evening I accepted your generous hospitality for a few days, and why to-day I hear a stern voice commanding me to leave immediately?”

“Yes, sir, I understand at least the motives for your wishing to leave us, which I regret exceedingly. Five days from now we will have a large hunt; numbers of our friends will be here. In the evening we will have quite a joyous festivity. I already felt proud and happy at the thought of introducing an artist of your talent to my guests . . . but since it is impossible for you to yield to my wishes, and you have decided to go, God watch over you!” . . .

“My dear father,” sighed Basilissa, “do not yet say good-bye to Master Wilfred. Why will he not remain for a few days? We will ask him no questions. If he is convinced that we will respect his secret, he will no longer feel obliged to leave Rotsburg so hastily.”

“Yes, my child, but how convince him, since he remains deaf to my persuasions and prayers?”

Basilissa joined her hands, and gave the young man a look which pierced his very soul.

“O! Master Wilfred,” she said in an enchanting voice, “I beg of you, be good to us! Remain several days; teach me your beautiful songs and legends; I will be so happy, I will

always think of you with gratitude . . . you bow your head and remain unmoved? Alas, no one has ever refused me anything: you are the first!”

The young man, as if enchanted by Basilissa's sweet prayer, became much shaken in his resolution.

“Yes, yes,” she said, her eyes bright with hope.

“Yes,” he said, vanquished, “yes, I will remain.”

“God be praised, he will remain,” cried the young girl, clapping her hands.

Sir Gouthier took the young man's hand, saying:

“I thank you, sir. May I be certain that you will delight my friends with your music, the evening of the hunt?”

“On one express and inviolable condition,” answered Wilfred; “that no one here will, either directly or indirectly, seek to know who I am or whence I come. No matter what I do, they must maintain towards me an absolute discretion. At the slightest word or allusion, which will lead me to fear that my secret may be discovered, I will leave without a word of explanation, or even good-bye. And you, my noble protectress, for whom I have so much respect and gratitude, will you not then accuse me of being ungrateful? Tell me that you accept and will fulfil these conditions, and I will thankfully accept your

hospitality, and remain with you until after the day of the hunt.”

“We accept your conditions, sir,” said Sir Gouthier.

“Not an indiscreet word shall fall from our lips,” added Basilissa.

“Then, sir,” said the old Lord, “consider yourself as if in the midst of your own family. You will teach my daughter some legends and ballads; and the remainder of the time we will pass in pleasant conversation. You will take all your meals with us, when we have no company; Of course you understand, such cannot be the case when we have noble knights with us.”

“Certainly, my Lord; a troubadour of humble birth, such as I, must not be discontented. Do not fear from me importunity, inconvenience, or indiscretion. My secret even imposes humility and reserve.”

“Come now, sir, the weather is beautiful, the sky is clear and the sun bright; we will take a walk around the Castle. Basilissa is an enthusiast about nature, and will point out to you the beauties much better than I.”

They walked for several hours, resting every now and then on a rock to enjoy the view.

Basilissa was happy; she took great pleasure in making the troubadour admire the lovely country which was spread out before their eyes.

Returning, tired of admiring the views, they paid less attention to nature, and Sir Gouthier

conversed with Wilfred on many subjects, which gave the young man an opportunity of showing how well versed he was on all.

Sir Gouthier felt his esteem for his guest increasing. What pleased him above all, was his great modesty and the delicacy of his sentiments; because Basilissa treated him with great familiarity, speaking as freely to him as to a brother, but the young man never forgot the distance which existed between him and the heiress of Rotsburg. He treated her with the greatest amount of respect, and answered her always in words carefully chosen, reserved and dignified, which seemed surprising in one who was lowly born. But Sir Gouthier dared not risk reflection on this subject, and explained it to himself as a habit acquired by troubadours, from mixing with the nobility. They returned to the Castle, and Wilfred dined with his hosts.

The young man became absorbed several times, but Basilissa distracted him sweetly; the innocent young girl little knew that she alone was the cause. Her look troubled him, her voice made his heart beat, and he frequently lowered his eyes to sustain himself against the charm of her presence.

After dinner he commenced to teach Basilissa his songs and fables. He showed so much zeal, and she proved so docile a pupil, that by the end of the day she knew two songs and four fables.

She had a pure sympathetic voice, with profound musical sentiment.

As to the Count de Rotsburg, he was in ecstasy when he heard his daughter sing with Wilfred.

That night when Wilfred retired to his bedroom, he seated himself on a chair, to think of all that had happened to him during the day.

At first his position seemed dangerous to him, because, hide it from himself as he would, he knew the interest inspired in him by the young girl was more than ordinary. And where would this lead him if his heart was really so deeply moved? Should he not fear and avoid all affectionate ties? Ah! he had been very imprudent, remaining at Rotsburg. However, he could not now leave before the hunt. If the old Lord and his daughter respected his conditions, he must hold to his promise! Alas! was it not a snare, set for him by the occult power which possessed him?

He let his head fall on his breast and remained for some time in a painful study; but Basilissa seemed to be standing before him smiling, and he murmured to himself:

“What difference does it make if her look agitates me, if I hide this weakness of my heart from every one? In five days I will recover my liberty. Then I will leave Rotsburg, and travel far beyond the Rhine, so as never to return to this country. My fears are vain . . . four days

will pass quickly! There will remain nothing between Basilissa and me but a sweet memory. Have confidence in God and rest, blessing His holy name!

For several minutes he raised his eyes to heaven as if to implore protection, then threw himself on the bed. Sweet dreams visited his sleep, without disturbing his repose.

## CHAPTER XI.

## THE CONQUERED HORSE.

FOUR days had passed, without Wilfred having any reason to regret his stay at Rotsburg. Basilissa already knew many songs, ballads and fables, in return for which she showed great friendship for Wilfred. Sir Gouthier enjoyed conversing with him, and had insisted several times that he should remain after the hunt. But Wilfred had most decidedly refused. Indeed, the young man could no longer dissimulate, even to himself, he no longer had possession of his heart, and must leave on the appointed day, if he did not wish to betray himself.

The day of the great hunt dawned. Wilfred had already been twice awakened by the sound of the horn, which he knew announced the arrival of the invited guests. After dressing he went to the window, and saw several noblemen arrive with their huntsmen and mounted followers.

His thoughts were very sad, remembering his paternal castle of Isersteen, his poor mother, his venerable father . . . and the brilliant hunts which he himself had conducted, as master and Lord. In imagination he saw the sombre forest

of Ever; the wolves, the bears, the stag and boars, all flashed before him; he even put spurs to his horse, running them to earth, riding over hill and dale, chasing and killing the fallow deer . . .

And whilst the air resounded with cries of Haro! haro! hali! hala! he blew on his hunting horn the triumphant whoop. When this vision was dispersed, he bowed his head in a disengaged manner.

“O, sweet springtime of my life!” sighed he, “beautiful heaven, which the tender smile of my mother brightens like the rays of the sun! liberty, power, pleasure, chivalrous deeds, you are all past for poor Wilfred. But the recollection is still a great happiness.”

He finished his toilet and went down stairs.

After breakfast he joined Sir Gouthier and Basilissa in the large courtyard, to assist in the final preparations for the hunt.

A dozen cavaliers were already there, with their followers; animation and excitement reigned supreme. The horses had been stabled to rest them, and were now brought out, saddled and bridled.

The kennels were opened. The hunters blew their horns, the sharp blasts of which made the horses neigh and the dogs bark.

All these exciting noises agitated Wilfred so that he could scarcely attend to the sweet words of Basilissa, who was explaining to him that

they frequently encountered wild beasts in the Rotsburg forest. The young man was seized with the hunting fever; his blood boiled, and his heart beat almost to bursting.

When all was ready, and they were about to mount, Sir Gouthier said laughingly, to the troubadour:

“I regret so much, sir, that you cannot at least follow the hunt at a distance. It is worth the trouble for one who has never seen such a spectacle; but you probably do not ride?”

“I beg your pardon, Sir,” answered Wilfred proudly; “I am a very good horseman.”

“Really! Do you wish to try, sir? I will be delighted to have you join us.”

Sir Gouthier ordered a huntsman to dismount, and give his horse, which was gentle and easily controlled, to Wilfred.

The huntsman seemed very much disappointed, being obliged to remain at the Castle, as there were no other available horses.

“You are angry, Martin,” said Sir Gouthier, “that you cannot follow the hunt? Is there no way for you to do so, unless you ride the stallion at the risk of an accident?”

“Oh! my Lord, you know that is impossible,” replied the hunter. “I will break my neck before I leave the Castle. No one can remain on the back of that devil.”

These words drew Wilfred’s attention, and excited his curiosity.

“Give me the stubborn horse. I will see if I can conquer him.”

Sir Gouthier and his friends sought to dissuade him from this wild idea. Basilissa was very much frightened, and joined her entreaties to the others; but the young man, carried away by excitement, showed such confidence in himself, that they consented to let him try. Sir Gouthier was convinced that at the sight of the stallion the troubadour would renounce this wild project.

Wilfred carefully buckled on a pair of very pointed spurs, and scarcely seemed to heed the counsel so sweetly given him by Basilissa.

Two grooms led the unruly stallion, already saddled and bridled; he was called the Devil. He was a beautiful animal, restive and full of fire, but easily managed if they did not attempt to mount him. He arched his neck and looked around with sparkling eyes, and uttered a terrible neigh, which re-echoed and frightened the other horses. Wilfred went to the stallion’s head, and spoke to him in a voice, the commanding tone of which astonished every one.

“Be careful of yourself! You are called the Devil; but if you were the evil spirit himself, you will find your match to-day. Behave yourself then, else you will come to grief through me.”

He refused the help of the grooms, and vaulted into the saddle, pressing his spurs into the sides of the horse. The animal was furious, and com-

menced to dart and kick and prance in every direction, at the same time jerking the reins, and starting so quickly that it scarcely seemed possible for Wilfred to remain in the saddle. The knights were grouped on the castle stairway watching this alarming spectacle.

The stallion, exasperated by his fruitless efforts, and by the repeated use of the spur, stood on his hind feet, trying at the same time, by shaking, to unseat the rider.

The spectators shuddered, fearing every minute to see the troubadour thrown to the ground and trampled under the horse's feet. Basilissa uttered cries of fright, raising her eyes to heaven.

. . . But, when she saw the stallion prance several times, and come down on his feet again without unhorsing his rider, who seemed fastened to the saddle, her fright changed to admiration, and her eyes sparkled with joy and pride at the sight of the young man's heroic victory.

The knights were impressed in the same way. The troubadour struggling thus, and winning a powerful victory over the furious animal, was really a beautiful and imposing spectacle—his eyes sparkling with pride, his ringing voice and energetic gestures, all tending to show in him the habit of command and of exercising his own will.

The stallion continued to swerve, first to the right and then to the left, and to prance in a frightful manner. But far from fearing his vio-

lence, Wilfred in managing him gave him terrible pricks with the spur, teased him incessantly, making him howl with rage and anger. After half an hour of this provoking struggle, a red stream came from the mouth of the horse, and the blood literally flowed from his sides. . . Then exhausted, breathing heavily, sweating and trembling all over, he suddenly bowed his head as though ashamed. He was conquered.

The stupefied knights, and even the grooms, congratulated the troubadour.

These congratulations recalled Wilfred to the danger of his position; he recognized that he had committed a grave indiscretion, which might compromise his secret. He calmed his agitation, knowing he would be questioned with regard to his skill in managing horses. But who knew? perhaps on the other hand he might have been urged to act so in order to hear his praises sounded by Basilissa.

He threw the bridle to a groom, and jumping to the ground, went towards the group of knights, who were still on the stairway. Sir Gouthier lavished praises on him, the knights all expressed their admiration. . . Basilissa muttered some scarcely intelligible words to express the fright and emotion caused by this spectacle. How extraordinary!—the young girl, instead of joining her congratulations to the others, lowered her eyes and appeared sad and confused.

One of the cavaliers cried, shaking his head:  
“You may pretend, sir, to be a troubadour; you are certainly at liberty to hide your rank . . . but I honor you and offer you my friendship convinced that I shake the hand of a nobleman, and a valiant Chevalier.”

“I thank you, Sir Chevalier, for your kind suppositions. This flattering mistake has often been made with regard to me. A few words will suffice to make you see your error. My father was a horse merchant; from my childhood I have been accustomed to mount and conquer the most unmanageable horses. I may say I have been brought up on a horse. Why then is it astonishing for me to ride like a cavalier, though I may be of low birth?”

There was nothing to answer to this explanation, and it was accepted without contradiction. If the entire attention had not been centered on the troubadour, they would have seen that these words drew a deep sigh from Basilissa.

“To horse, to horse, gentlemen!” cried Sir Gouthier. “We have no time to lose, the sun is already high in the heaven . . . Buglers, sound the call.”

The Chevaliers mounted: Wilfred sprang on the stallion, who, recognizing the hand and voice of his conqueror, acted like a lamb.

The hunters left the Castle, to the music of the horns, the barking of the dogs, and the neighing of the horses.

Basilissa remained on the stairway absorbed in profound thought, as immovable as a statue. But struck by a sudden thought, she entered the house, and running to the northern tower, looked from the window towards the top of the rocks along the winding road, which crossed the river like a bridge.

From there she could see the hunters, and distinguish amongst them the troubadour by his tall horse and his clothes, which looked poor beside the brilliant costumes of the Lords.

Forgetting everything, she remained by the window, until the hunters had crossed the plateau and disappeared from view. She went slowly down to her own room, and dropping into a chair, remained staring into vacancy. Now a smile would cross her lips, now she would heave a deep sigh, now she would shiver, as if with a chill . . . finally she bowed her head in her hands and wept bitterly.

## CHAPTER XII.

## THE BEAR.

THE hunters now went northward towards the dark forest which covered the most remote part of the plateau.

Sometimes the road was so rough that the knights were obliged to ride single file. Then Wilfred remained in the back ground, thinking of Basilissa's strange attitude—she had not offered him the slightest congratulations, on the contrary had seemed rather displeased with his victory over the stallion.

Whilst alone he had a few moments for reflection and soliloquized thus :

“Perhaps her tender, pure soul is frightened at anything that resembles violence. Yes, that must have been the cause of her preoccupied air. She considers such proofs of strength and courage only a sign of a hard and insensible heart, which would impose its implacable will even on a weak woman. How mistaken she is! I would obey like a slave the slightest look from her eyes . . . But, O Heaven! Where are my thoughts carrying me? Am I demented? Ah! God be thanked, to-morrow I will recover my liberty and will bid good-by to Rotsburg, never to return.”

Nevertheless, he sighed, and continued his reverie, only recovering himself when the cavalcade took a wider road and he found himself in the midst of the knights, who continued to praise the strength and courage which the troubadour had displayed, and questioned him in every way, with regard to his birthplace, his parents, and his education ; because it seemed impossible to them that a young man, whom Sir Gouthier had so praised as a singer and an artist, could show at the same time a courage and skill which could only be expected from those carefully drilled as knights.

Embarrassed by their questions, and forced to answer, Wilfred at first hesitated, then, deciding on his rôle, he mentioned a number of things with regard to his birth-place and his parents ; but what he told them was not mere invention. He expressed himself with great simplicity, and entered into details so precise and probable, that finally no one doubted his sincerity, and were convinced that he was really the son of a horse-dealer.

From this moment, though always agreeable with him, they never forgot the distance that separated an artist of obscure birth from a belted knight.

After more than an hour's march they reached the large plain; it was thickly wooded in several places; and they fully expected to see a deer or a stag rush forth.

The greater portion of the day had passed before they found game worthy of being hunted.

Courage was beginning to fail them and they feared they would be obliged to return to the castle with empty game-bags, when suddenly the woods echoed with the cries of: “Haro! haro! hali! hali!” The horns sounded joyfully, and the hunters followed the track of a hind, which came from the woods and crossed the plateau like a streak of lightning.

The hind ran towards the dark forest, and soon disappeared under the large trees. The hunters pursued it with increasing ardor; but as they could not agree about the roads, they soon separated into little groups.

Sir Gouthier, three knights, the troubadour and five or six servants, had not lost sight of the deer. They followed it for more than half an hour, and were already congratulating themselves on their success, when suddenly the bewildered animal jumped to a side and fell into a narrow ravine.

The knights and their companions could scarcely persuade their horses to go through this narrow defile, but once there, recommenced the chase with renewed vigor.

Sir Gouthier ran on ahead, and kept up the excitement by crying he had again seen the deer, she was nearly exhausted, and could not escape them.

He suddenly uttered a terrible shriek of fear

and surprise . . . A great bear rushed towards them, growling and showing his enormous teeth.

At the unexpected apparition of this frightful beast, the horses were seized with terror, and tried to unseat their riders or to rush up the steep rocks.

The black stallion had started like the others, but Wilfred turned him around immediately to make him face the danger . . . He had scarcely turned when he uttered a cry of agony and horror; glancing quickly, he saw Sir Gouthier stretched on the ground, the bear rushing at him, his paws raised as if to tear him to pieces. No one seemed able to go to his assistance; his companions and followers, some too far away, others like himself thrown on the ground. Wilfred jumped from his horse without a moment's hesitation, snatched a spear from one of the pages, rushed to Sir Gouthier's aid, and facing the bear, ran his spear into the animal's heart so violently that the point came out through his back.

The bear was mortally wounded, but growling and groaning terribly, he tried to strike the horseman; instead his nails caught in his doublet, tearing it to shreds, and finally he fell on his side and died in a horrible convulsion.

Wilfred, thinking that Sir Gouthier was badly wounded, knelt beside him, raising his head. With tears in his eyes, he complained bitterly at the fate of his generous host.

But Sir Gouthier arose slowly, saying:

“Do not be frightened about me; my back is probably a little hurt, but it is caused by my fall; the bear has not touched me. O Wilfred, courageous young man, you are my saviour; your assistance has saved me from death; without your admirable presence of mind, my poor Basilissa would now be an orphan! How can I repay such a service? Ask for anything you wish: and if it is in my power I will joyfully grant it you.”

Wilfred replied that he had only done his duty, and that the happiness of seeing his host safe and well was sufficient recompense. There was no time for anything more to be said, because the Chevaliers and huntsmen had recovered and soon surrounded Sir Gouthier, looking at the gigantic bear, whilst the servants were with greatest difficulty preventing the dogs from spoiling the skin of the animal.

The horn sounded at different intervals to collect the hunters, so they were soon all assembled in the ravine.

Sir Gouthier told them what had happened—how the troubadour had saved his life, by transfixing the ferocious animal. Those who had witnessed the scene added their details, and lauded the young man’s courage. Perhaps some of the Chevaliers were jealous at the thought of so much praise being given to a troubadour of low birth; in any case they hid their chagrin, and

shaking Wilfred by the hand, showered him with thanks for preserving the life of their host.

As the day was well advanced, they resolved to stop the hunt. Many cavaliers and huntsmen were wounded from falls, the horses were tired, and the bear was a prize large and rare enough to satisfy them.

The huntsmen fastened the bear on the strongest of the horses. They entered Rotsburg in a triumphant manner, and in the evening celebrated the death of the monster, and Sir Gouthier's safety, by drinking the best wine the cellars afforded.

They returned slowly, because the horse which carried the booty could only go in a walk. They entertained each other for a long time with the courage and sang froid shown by the troubadour in saving the life of the Lord of Rotsburg. Then the conversation took another strain.

Wilfred, who had slackened his horse's pace, remained a little behind. He was thinking of Basilissa. He had saved her father's life. What would she say? How would she show her gratitude? He already saw, in imagination, the young girl's sweet glance and her celestial smile. How happy he felt at the thought of having preserved the lovely young girl from so agonizing a grief! His heart beat with joy and hope.

Then he reflected that he must leave the Castle the next morning, and would probably

never see Basilissa again. This anticipation cruelly affected him. But there was nothing for him to do; he was the victim of his horrible fate.

At this moment Sir Gouthier, who had also slackened his gait, placed himself beside him, and asked, in a voice filled with emotion:

“Sir, will you persist in your resolution? Must you go to-morrow?”

“Yes, my Lord,” sadly answered Wilfred; “I must admit that it is very difficult to leave protectors so generous and kind, but I am obliged to do so.”

“Obliged?—that is to say you think so, because you fear that you will divulge the secret which you wish to guard. But we will keep our word, my daughter and I. Has either of us asked a single indiscreet question?”

“No, my Lord, and I am exceedingly thankful to you; but you have heard, my Lord, how the knights, your noble guests, have questioned me. They have made me mention certain truths which I wished to hide, and to tell untruths which humiliate me.”

“But, Sir Wilfred, these knights leave to-morrow; then we will be several weeks without visitors, and you will not meet with anything to worry or inconvenience you. I already feel for you an unaccountable sympathy; your conversation is a great pleasure to me. And now that you have saved me from a dreadful death, it will be a great grief to me to part with you to-morrow. Remain some time with us?”

“I cannot, my Lord; an irresistible power governs me.”

“Have you no pity on my daughter?” replied Sir Gouthier. “The naïve child adores music and singing. You have made her happy teaching her something of your art: but that only increases her desire to learn more. She has begged me to persuade you to change your mind: It is in her name, sir, that I entreat you. Well, what do you say? You hesitate? God be thanked, you will remain, will you not?”

“How long?” murmured Wilfred irresolutely.

“A month, perhaps.”

“Oh, no! the very thought frightens me.”

“A couple of weeks, then?”

“Wait, my Lord:—in order to please you and your lovely daughter, I will remain five days longer. . . . Heaven grant that I may not regret it!—but on condition that after that time, you will make no further effort to detain me.”

“Five days? that is very little,” said Sir Gouthier, “but I thank you for your compliance. No one will try to make you remain longer: here is my hand as a guarantee of my promise. How delighted Basilissa will be! I am impatient to tell her the good news. Do not mind, my valiant saviour, if I return to my friends. Courtesy and hospitality require me to remain in their company.”

And putting spurs to his horse, he rejoined his guests.

Wilfred, when left alone, began to regret the promise which Sir Gouthier had drawn from him—that is, he tried to think he was vexed at it—but in reality he was very happy; and when he thought that for five days he could bask in the sunlight of Basilissa’s smile, his face brightened with happiness.

At last the cortege crossed the river, and ascended the heights of Rotsburg, to the fanfare of the horns.

## CHAPTER XIII.

## LOVE AND HONOR.

WHEN they entered the castle court they found Basilissa awaiting them, surrounded by her women and pages, attracted there by the lively noise of the cavaliers.

Sir Gouthier dismounted, called Wilfred, and showing the monstrous bear to his daughter, told her the danger he had run, and how the troubadour had saved him from a terrible death.

That Basilissa grew pale and shuddered at the recital astonished neither Wilfred nor Sir Gouthier; but, when they had finished she remained perfectly quiet.

“Oh! my child,” cried the old Lord, very much affected, “here is your father’s saviour. Be grateful to him and thank him from the bottom of your heart; if it had not been for his courage, you would now be an orphan.”

“I thank you, I bless . . . you,” stammered the young girl, bowing her head, without looking at Wilfred.

On her father’s remarking it, she answered hesitatingly that the danger through which he had passed filled her with fear and made her head swim: besides, she had been indisposed all

day, and was far from well. A knight came just then, interrupting the conversation of Sir Gouthier and his daughter.

Wilfred, believing in her sincerity, tried to console and encourage the young girl, saying her indisposition would only be temporary, and that to-morrow there would be no trace of it; but Basilissa appeared distract, looking for her father, and giving only vague excuses.

“Bah! bah! my child,” gaily cried Sir Gouthier, turning towards her, “you will be cured immediately, when you hear the good news: Master Wilfred is to remain five days longer with us.”

The young girl trembled as if more frightened than ever; nevertheless she hid her agitation as much as possible, and forcing a smile, turned to Wilfred, saying:

“Master Wilfred is very good to us; I thank him most heartily.”

“Now gentlemen, I am going to make my toilet, and change this torn doublet; any of you who wish to follow my example and refresh yourselves will be shown to your rooms. Dinner in an hour.” After which he turned towards the Castle stairway.

Basilissa followed him with her eyes, then as if she had something particular to say, ran after him and disappeared through the great doorway, leaving Wilfred, to his great surprise standing alone, without having addressed a word to him.

The young man remained with his eyes fastened on the ground. What could be the cause of this change towards him? Had he wounded her in any way? He vainly thought over his conduct. What was it then? A return of Basilissa's indisposition? Perhaps some of her father's guests had condemned the friendship which she had shown to a poor troubadour, a man of low extraction: that was possible. He promised himself then to be more discreet and reserved, above all in the presence of the Lord of Rotsburg's noble guests.

He went slowly towards the Castle, in order to go to his room, intending to array himself in more suitable garments for the banquet, because he must sing to entertain the noble company. He must now exercise more humility, and above all avoid Basilissa's glances, for fear that the troubadour should presume on the kindness shown him by his superiors.

A short time afterwards he went down; but instead of entering the dining-hall, he opened the door of a small room and stood before the window in a pensive manner.

Soon he heard a light step on the stairway, and turned in time to see Basilissa's smiling countenance. Perhaps he was mistaken, and she was going to speak to him with her usual amiability. But the young girl immediately retraced her steps on seeing him, pretending to have forgotten something.

What could be the meaning of this strange conduct? Wilfred was so deeply affected by it that he threw himself on a chair, and bowing his head in his hands, remained in deep thought, until roused by a page, sent by Sir Gouthier, who was asking for him.

On entering the banquet hall, he saw that all the cavaliers had taken their places at table. Basilissa was seated at her father's side, richly dressed, and wearing the most beautiful precious stones. She looked queenlike: nevertheless she seemed sad, and her cheeks were the color of marble. Was she then really ill?

“Master Wilfred,” said Sir Gouthier, “these gentlemen, my noble guests, think that a young man who has saved the life of their host is deserving of a seat at table with them. Come then, join us, and if you entertain us later with your beautiful songs and ballads, it must be as a companion and friend, not as a troubadour.”

Wilfred stammered his thanks, and seated himself at the end of the table, a page pointing out his place to him. He was delighted to be so far away from Basilissa, and only to get a side view of her, as he would not then run the risk of encountering her glances, and thus neither he nor she would be obliged to exercise such strict surveillance to escape the criticism of the knights.

The banquet lasted quite a while, the wine had untied their tongues; but when the last

course was served they all expressed great desire to hear some songs.

Wilfred seemed pleased and tuned his lyre . . . But he suddenly saw Basilissa get up and leave the room, with her head bent.

Sir Gouthier made his daughter's excuses, saying she was ill.

After a few minutes' delay, they again begged Wilfred to sing. His song however was not very lively. They tried in vain to make him drink. Then, taking his lyre, he played a brighter air, and at his host's request, repeated the eulogy on wine. The Chevaliers all admired his beautiful voice, and the expression which he knew so well to give to his songs. But, Sir Gouthier thought that Wilfred was not in the mood for singing, because he showed less talent than usual.

He finally asked the troubadour why he felt so. Wilfred answered that he was frightfully shocked when he saw his noble patron seized by the bear, and that he had not yet recovered from the effect: that he had only remained at table to entertain the noble assembly, and that he would feel grateful if they would permit him to retire.

No one doubted his sincerity, and all begged of him to retire immediately.

Wilfred van Isersteen scarcely closed his eyes the whole night. He continued to ask himself the cause of Basilissa's strange conduct. This worried him so, that he tossed all night on his bed.

The mind of man is subject to a thousand fancies. Until morning, the young man thought that Basilissa felt only for him a sympathy on account of their mutual love of music and song, and was delighted not to see a more tender sentiment. Now that the young girl by her peculiar conduct made him think she was vexed with him, he felt very much irritated, and could scarcely restrain his tears.

Several times he reproached himself as weak, but would almost immediately relapse into a sad reverie, as if Basilissa's affection had become a necessity to him. Towards morning, however, he fell asleep, completely overcome by fatigue.

When he awoke, the day was already far advanced; he mustered all his courage to hide his feelings, and on going down-stairs found the old lord and his daughter waiting breakfast for him. After saying good morning, he timidly asked the young girl if she had passed a good night, and if she felt better? To his great surprise she answered him in a friendly way, and although still pale and rather silent, he thought he had been mistaken, and that her friendship for him was the same. This idea so fully restored his good humor that he proposed rehearsing some of his songs with her after breakfast. But Basilissa seemed frightened at this proposition, excused herself, saying her nerves were out of order and that she could not stand the noise, and that the sound of his lyre was partic-

ularly painful to her. A few minutes later, under pretext of having to make her toilet, she arose and went to her room.

Sir Gouthier and Wilfred felt a certain uneasiness about her indisposition, and expressed the hope that it would not last long; they thought she was already better. As soon as Basilissa returned they would go out of doors and walk about; perhaps a little exercise would benefit her.

Their conversation had lasted quite a while, when a servant entered, saying that her mistress begged her father and the troubadour not to wait for her, as she had a headache and wished to rest for a few hours in her own room. They saw, then, that they would be obliged to take their walk without her.

Basilissa appeared at dinner; at first she seemed much better and forced herself to be bright and cheerful, though she soon relapsed into silence, and becoming pensive, seemed to grieve more and more as Wilfred tried to encourage and console her.

Dinner was scarcely over when she found a new pretext to retire.

Things remained so during several days. When Basilissa was alone with her father, she was very sad, but she did not seem to desire to be alone; but when Wilfred spoke to her she became restless and agitated, and would leave immediately.

It soon became evident to Wilfred that the young girl avoided him. It seemed to him as if a feeling of hatred against him, had risen in her heart. This idea made him suffer terribly; and he too, seemed to evince an irresistible desire for solitude. When alone in his room, he could at least think of Basilissa and deplore her change of manner towards him.

One more day, and he must leave! He did not congratulate himself now; on the contrary, this separation frightened him. . . . If poor Basilissa was threatened, perhaps, with some grave malady! If she were to die after his departure! O Heaven, what painful thoughts!

Her father also was worried about her health, and spoke several times of calling a physician: But Basilissa opposed him, at least for the present; she begged for a respite of three days, then if not completely restored she would comply with his wishes. The delay which she had insisted on astonished both the Lord and the troubadour, as it would be the day of Wilfred's departure. Sir Gouthier did not know what to think; Basilissa's replies to his questions were so vague and so strange, that he did not doubt that her sickness had some secret cause; but the true reason was so opposed to the chivalrous manners of the times, so unnatural and so impossible, that it did not even suggest itself to him . . . Wilfred's departure was fixed for the next day. The evening before, they had determined to take a

last walk; but Basilissa excused herself, and remained in the house. When the old Lord returned after a walk around the park, he went to his daughter's room, and found her kneeling on her prie-dieu bathed in tears: her red eyes showed that she had been weeping. Seeing her father, she uttered a cry of anguish, and a feeling of shame caused her to bow her head and hide her face in her hands. Sir Gouthier approached her.

“Basilissa,” said he in a severe tone, “your conduct during the past few days is inexplicable, and pains me very much. A secret grief wrings your heart; you shed numerous tears in solitude, and your poor father, who wishes to console you, does not know the cause of your trouble. Has your father done anything to destroy your confidence? Has he lost his child's affection before going to his grave? Alas, how embittered will be my last days by such an evil? You tremble, Basilissa. Ah! my poor child, how deeply I pity your unhappiness. I wish to know your trouble, to console you, and give peace to your heart. Ah! believe that your father loves you tenderly, and would accomplish even the impossible to relieve your troubles. Tell me, Basilissa, what grieves you?”

“Mercy, mercy, my dear father,” she cried. “For the love of God do not ask me.”

“Is it then so terrible?” asked Sir Gouthier.

“Yes, yes, terrible, awful,” she replied. “It

will fill you with horror and embitter your life. Let me keep my fatal secret: I will try to stifle it in my heart.” . . .

The old Lord was seized with a secret agony, and said in severe tone:

“Basilissa, look me in the face!—right in the face, I tell you!”

“I dare not,” murmured the young girl.

“You dare not! What does this mean? Have you then committed some fault which you dare not acknowledge? Oh! my God, if I did not know the purity of your heart, I might believe you guilty of some bad action. Tell me then that I am mistaken—that you are still my good, my sweet, my innocent Basilissa.”

The young girl appeared overcome, and sighed deeply, and remained silent. Sir Gouthier watched her a minute with increasing agony; then, his anger rising, he said in a hard voice:

“Basilissa, you must speak. In virtue of my right as your father, I command you to tell me what makes you unhappy and ill. You are dumb?—then in the name of my unlimited affection, and in the name of your dead mother, I beg of you, obey me.”

The poor girl trembled in every limb, and bowed her head still lower.

Sir Gouthier, deeply wounded at her resistance, took her by the shoulder crying:

“Speak, speak: I am your master and your father—I wish it.”

Basilissa, turning, fell on her knees, and raising her trembling hands to him, said:

“Pardon, O my dear father, forgive your poor child.”

“Why, why?”

“I love him—I love him to distraction. It is terrible, terrible; I have lost my mind—it will kill me.” . . .

Sir Gouthier started: he looked at her perfectly speechless, frowning as if it were incomprehensible. A painful light seemed to enter his soul, and he asked in a stifled voice:

“You love him? Whom do you mean?”

“The troubadour,” she replied, in a tremulous voice.

“Great God! Is it possible?” cried Sir Gouthier despairingly, “my daughter, the heiress to the noble house of Rotsburg, give her love to a peasant! Alas! alas! that I have lived long enough to see the escutcheon of my ancestors soiled by such a stain.”

Crushed by grief and shame, he sank on a chair, with his head bent low, whilst great tears rolled down his cheeks.

Basilissa had bowed her head on the prie-dieu, and was sobbing as if her heart would break.

Her tears calmed Sir Gouthier’s mind, and pity for the girl overcame his anger. He approached his daughter, and taking her by the arm, raised her gently, saying in a sad, sweet voice:

“Unhappy child, how could you so forget the pride of your race? Come, sit down . . . You say that you love him? The troubadour? Does he know it?”

“No father, he does not know it.”

“And is he bold enough to dare speak to you of love?”

“Never, father.”

“And do you think he would presume so far as to love you, even in the depths of his heart?”

“I do not know, father; I do not think so.”

The Chevalier breathed more freely, as if relieved of a great weight.

“Certainly, Basilissa, your love for a peasant is blameworthy; but if no one knows of it except your father, and you stifle and forget it immediately, there will only be the remembrance of a sad error. Take courage then, my child, your grief will not last long; he leaves to-morrow, and we will never see him again. But what do I see?—the idea of his departure makes you shudder.”

“My father, O my father, mercy, have compassion on your unhappy child!” she cried.

“Do not let him go.”

“Not let him go—O heaven!”

“Ah, I will die, I will die!”

“Basilissa, unfortunate child, are you crazy?” murmured the old Lord, painfully surprised.

She again held her hands towards him and said, with her eyes full of tears:

“Father, let me confide all my trouble to you. I will hide nothing from you; but listen patiently. If I am culpable, my will is not to blame. Ah! why did fate throw the troubadour across my path? . . . Before I had ever seen him, the sound of his voice had inspired me with a secret sympathy. When I saw and heard him at the first banquet given to your friends, he seemed to me to be so handsome, so imposing, from that minute his image seemed always to follow me. I was neither frightened nor confused, because I only felt friendly towards him and admired his talent, though I often felt my heart beat when he glanced at me with his clear eyes. It was the morning of the hunt that I received my death-blow. A disquieting light seemed to flood my mind. Ah, father, you admired him as much as I, when he conquered that unmanageable horse by his energetic will. But did you remark how his eyes flashed and his face brightened at his triumph?—how his attitude, his strong limbs, his touching voice, all united to give him the appearance not only of a nobleman, but of a prince, accustomed to command? Did not you and your guests have the same suspicions? Acknowledge it, father!”

“It is true,” involuntarily murmured Sir Gouthier.

“Well,” she replied, “I only remained under the impression that Wilfred was a Chevalier of noble birth for about half an hour, and this

short time sufficed to change my friendship into an irresistible and overpowering love. Master Wilfred came toward us and proved that we had all been mistaken. He is the son of an obscure horse-dealer. Ah! how I have suffered from that moment! How my heart has been torn with shame! You have seen father, I became ill, I avoided Master Wilfred, I shuddered when he looked at me, I hid my agony and regret, I did not even thank my father's preserver. I struggled against myself with great energy and despair; I prayed, God from morning until night to give me the strength to overcome my guilty inclinations . . . Alas, now he is going away! This separation, my dear father, is a death-blow to me: A secret voice seems to pursue me, murmuring in my ear: ‘If he goes you will die!’”

Sir Gouthier was very much touched. He understood, alas! only too well, that the poor child's will was not at fault in this fatal entanglement. He took her hand, saying tenderly:

“Basilissa, my dear child, the evil is not so great as you think. You are more unhappy than guilty. Without doubt Master Wilfred is wonderfully endowed; his mind, his education, his courage, everything about him leads you to believe that he has been well reared; but as he is positively the son of a peasant, all these merits cannot ennable him, any more than can the glorious fact of having saved your father's life. Reflect calmly on this sad affair, and be reason-

able. You say Master Wilfred's departure will make you ill? All young girls think thus when crossed in love; but this is easily cured Basilissa, absence is a powerful remedy. Suppose Master Wilfred had gone a day or two ago . . . You sigh and tremble? Do you think we can possibly keep him? But, my poor child, this would be a continual source of grief for both of us, and an ineffaceable blot on our race.”

“Ah! my father, my dear father, how unhappy I am!” groaned the young girl.

“Judge for yourself, Basilissa,” replied the old chevalier, “suppose Master Wilfred remains here, how will you act towards him? Can you show your love for an obscure minstrel in the presence of your servants? Then, yes, then you would die of shame, and your old father would soon follow you. Whatsoever you may suffer, you must submit to the law of honor. Now no one will know of your fancy, and later you will bless me for giving you such counsel. Come, be courageous; and tell me that you recognize your duty, and that you will fulfil it.”

The young girl still resisted feebly, but she could find no further reason to excuse her weakness, and finally promised her father that she would submit with resignation to her sad fate. She shed many tears and seemed to dread the separation; but her duty was clearly marked—she would not be the one to tarnish the paternal coat of arms.

Following her father's advice, she did not leave her room that day. However, she could not let him go without a few words of farewell to the man who had saved her father's life. He was convinced that the young girl would be equal to the separation the next morning, and that she would take leave of the troubadour gracefully, addressing a few words of thanks to him.

Sir Gouthier still grieved, but feeling more secure, embraced his daughter, encouraged her to preserve her strength, then went down stairs to his guest. He found him in the dining hall, as supper had already been announced. The young man bowed silently. He seemed very sad. The Chevalier, on his part, was not inclined to conversation, as he now felt very much embarrassed before Wilfred, since receiving his daughter's confidence. They took their places at table without speaking, and it was after the first course that Wilfred asked hesitatingly, and with apparent uneasiness :

“How is the Lady Basilissa, my Lord? Will she not be down this evening? Alas! I trust the good God will preserve her from a serious illness !”

“She is not well, but it is nothing serious,” replied Sir Gouthier.

“Have you not sent for a doctor, my Lord? Your daughter's indisposition is very strange ; I tremble at the thought that it might be the fore-runner of a serious illness.”

“No, you are mistaken, sir; I am not worried about it.”

They grew silent again, when supper was over.

“That good and noble lady,” said Wilfred, as if finishing his reflections aloud, “has shown so much courtesy and friendship for a poor troubadour who does not merit them! My gratitude is infinite; her sufferings fill me with pity. You really think, sir, that her indisposition is not serious? Heaven grant that your suppositions are correct! But, I have learned from a celebrated physician that when a person who loves music is seized with a sudden distaste for it because it agitates the nerves, that it indicates serious illness.”

“That might be true in many cases,” answered Sir Gouthier, feigning indifference, “but you are certainly mistaken with regard to Basilissa.”

“One does not risk anything in trying a remedy. I know of some herbs which are an infallible cure for nervousness, and, if you wish, I will seek them to-morrow.

“To-morrow?” answered the Chevalier in a surprised manner. “Are you not going away to-morrow?”

The young man blushed deeply.

“Where are my thoughts?” he sighed. “Certainly, certainly, I must go to-morrow!”

“Is this an irrevocable decision?”

“I must. I beg of you, my Lord, do not try to detain me.”

“No, sir, have no fear, I have given you my promise. Do you leave early?”

“Immediately after breakfast, my Lord.”

Sir Gouthier rose, and went towards the salon.

“Wait here a minute, sir,” he said; “I have something to settle with you, and to-morrow I might not find a favorable opportunity.”

He disappeared behind a door, which led to the armory of the Castle.

Wilfred looked after him with astonishment. Settle an affair with him? Did he suspect his love for Basilissa? Was he going to reproach him for it, and then punish him?

Whilst the young man asked himself these questions, Sir Gouthier went to a small apartment at the end of the armory, and opening an iron-bound chest, took from it a handful of gold pieces, filled a purse, and put it in his pocket.

Entering the dining-room, he said to Wilfred:

“Sir, you entertained my guests, and your talents have given me many pleasant minutes. It is a custom among knights to make troubadours handsome presents. But I must otherwise recompense the man who saved my life. Do not then be astonished at my gift, and accept it as a pledge of my gratitude.”

Saying these words, he put a heavy purse into the young man’s hands.

Wilfred, prompted by a feeling of curiosity,

opened the purse; a pile of gold pieces glittered before his eyes, a great treasure for a poor troubadour. He, nevertheless, contemplated this for an instant with a smile, which was both sad and ironical.

The old Count could not understand this air of disappointment and contempt.

“You do not seem satisfied, sir?” he said,  
“Do you wish more?”

“Money, money,” groaned Wilfred. “You pay me! You drag from me the happiness I might have had after leaving, thinking I had rendered you an important service.”

“But what do you wish then?” asked Sir Gouthier, surprised. “If you wish another recompense,” he continued hesitatingly, tell me, and if it is possible” . . .

Wilfred took two or three gold pieces, and returned the rest.

“I beg of you, my Lord,” he said: “Oh do not refuse my prayer! it is a grief, a great grief to me to leave your castle, where I have received such generous hospitality. Now that, pursued by inexorable fate, I must recommence my wanderings through the world, and suffer and endure humiliations, far from my country, my parents, and all dear to me, the thought of having saved your life, through gratitude and pure devotion, would be to me a source of courage and consolation . . . And you wish to pay me! Oh, let me keep this memory pure and unsullied! Three or

four pieces of gold will, I assure you, keep me from want for a long time. Keep the rest, I beg of you, my Lord.”

“What, take them back? Impossible. It would be accepting a present from your hands,” said Sir Gouthier, with a shade of displeasure.

“Well, my Lord, believe me, I will not touch the money!” said Wilfred, his eyes glittering with a proud resolution. “All my life I will remember your generosity; but my soul must also feel that there is a grateful remembrance of the poor Troubadour at Rotsburg.”

“You wish then to force my gratitude?” stammered Sir Gouthier, surprised at the young man’s commanding look.

“Force you? no, my Lord; but you are too magnanimous to forget an unrequited service, even though rendered by a peasant.”

“The money was given you; it belongs to you.”

“Then let us dispose of it together, my Lord,” said the young man. “Let Lady Basilissa, who loves to succor the miserable, distribute it in alms. It will give her great pleasure to bestow so many benefits, and the blessings of the poor may influence heaven to shed some brightness into my bitter life.”

“But you are poor yourself,” said Sir Gouthier, much moved.

“Rich,” repeated Wilfred, with an enthusiastic smile, “to know that Lady Basilissa

would think of me each time that she put a gold piece into a pauper's hand. It would be the greatest recompense to my sad soul."

The old Lord dried a tear. Although these words frightened him, he gave his approbation to the young man's project, and took the gold, promising not to speak of this money to his daughter until after the troubadour's departure. Then, under the pretext of his daughter's being alone, he bade the young man good-night and left him.

Wilfred remained alone for a few minutes, then went to his room to abandon himself to his sad thoughts.

## CHAPTER XIV.

## LOVE'S TRIUMPH.

WILFRED VAN ISERSTEEN was standing in the middle of the large hall, ready for departure, looking very sad and disconsolate.

During breakfast Sir Gouthier had told him that Basilissa was still suffering, and she would only be down in time to say good bye. The old Lord went to seek his daughter, and now the separation was inevitable.

Since his meditations during the long night the young man had schooled himself to his duty, and he believed himself strong enough to hide his agitation. His heart beat quickly at the thought of seeing Basilissa for the last time.

He tried to muster all his courage, and proudly raised his head as if resigned to his fate.

Hearing a noise on the stairway, he stepped back . . . and when he saw Basilissa on her father's arm, he stifled an agonized cry. The young girl was pale, but her red eyes and despairing countenance would have wrung tears from the most obdurate heart . . . She lowered her eyes and seemed reluctant to enter the hall; but Sir Gouthier led her towards the troubadour, saying:

“Sir, my daughter, although ill, would not

allow you to leave us until she had once more thanked you, not only for your excellent lessons, but above all for the special service you have rendered her father. Excuse her if her adieus are said by me: her nerves have become so unstrung, that on this subject she is unable to converse. God keep you, and give you a pleasant voyage.”

The young man, during this address, had kept his eyes on Basilissa. She trembled in every limb, and could scarcely stand. As he said nothing, Sir Gouthier spoke severely:

“Sir, have pity on my daughter. Since you must leave us, I beg you make your farewell as short as possible.”

In a voice full of emotion, Wilfred stammered:

“Noble Lady, I am grieved indeed that I must carry with me the thought that you are ill! Never, never for a single moment of my life, can I forget your generous hospitality. If God hears my fervent prayers, you will soon be well and happy! Think sometimes of the poor troubadour. Good bye, good bye!”

Tears streamed from his eyes, and as if this weakness had made him take a sudden resolution, he walked quickly towards the door, without even pressing the extended hand of the old Lord. But cries of grief and distress caused him suddenly to return.

He saw Basilissa struggling violently to escape from her father’s arm, in order to run to him, crying all the while:

“Stay, stay! . . . My dear father, keep him!  
Ah! do not kill me.”

At her cries, four or five servants rushed forward. Sir Gouthier feared this threatened outburst, and wished to lead Basilissa away. But despair gave her superhuman strength; she resisted him, and cried whilst holding his hand:

“Wilfred, pity me! Do not leave me! I will die . . . father, I am doing wrong, but he has my soul, my life! Make him remain! Wilfred, Wilfred.”

At a sign from their Lord, the astonished servants came forward . . . But Sir Gouthier noticed that his daughter was fainting in his arms. In his turn he uttered a sad cry, fearing she would not recover. Nevertheless, the disgrace stifled for a moment his paternal disquietude.

Had not his daughter uttered in his presence, and in that of his domestics, cries that betrayed her weakness?

He lifted Basilissa in his arms, carrying her into another room, followed by all the servants. Wilfred was immovable; he was white as a statue, and from time to time a tear rolled from his eyes. At times the idea crossed his mind that he must fly from Rotsburg, but a mysterious power nailed him to the spot . . . Oh, God! was Basilissa dead?

For a moment he could only distinguish from behind the closed doors the cries of the servants. Soon he heard the ringing voice of Basilissa,

calling his name; he also heard the words, “love . . . die.”

From these words he realized that he had not suffered alone, that the young girl had shared his love. A happy smile parted his lips, and he cast a look of thanksgiving towards heaven, but this brief illusion soon vanished before stern reality.

All sounds had ceased: no complaint, no sighs, no movement could he hear. What had happened? The death-like stillness frightened him. They had taken her into another room, or perhaps she had again relapsed into unconsciousness.

Sir Gouthier closed the door after him, no doubt to prevent Basilissa following. His brows were contracted, his lips drawn. He seemed much irritated. Upon perceiving the troubadour, he said abruptly:

“Still here? I believed you already far from Rotsburg. Why have you not gone?”

“Ah! how is the poor young lady?” asked Wilfred, as if he had not understood the reproach.

“She is weeping over her fatal error and her lost happiness,” murmured Sir Gouthier.

There was a moment’s silence. The Chevalier cast a piercing look at the troubadour, but his heart refused to bear malice against the man who had saved his life: he sat down and burst into tears.

Wilfred came near, saying in a sad, sweet voice:

“My Lord, you are unhappy, and you blame me. I cannot leave thus. I know why you weep; but I dare not ask in what way I have had the unhappiness to offend you?”

“Alas!” said Sir Gouthier, “would to heaven that cruel fate had never led you to my castle! Perhaps you are not guilty—nevertheless your arrival at Rotsburg has been a curse for me and my poor child . . . You shake your head? Do you not understand? Must I then tell you all? My child is forever disgraced; the shield of my ancestors is stained with an ineffaceable blot.”

“Ah! my Lord, do not exaggerate!” burst forth Wilfred. “I am going . . .”

“I exaggerate?—you go,” repeated Sir Gouthier, with sad irony. “Have you not heard my daughter publish her disgrace in presence of our domestics? Will they ever forget that the heiress of Rotsburg has loved a troubadour, a man of low birth? Go, sir, go to the other end of the world; my daughter will continue to deplore her unaccountable weakness, she will linger, and her poor father will go to his grave, there to await his wretched daughter.

“Ah! has she not given her affections to the poorest of men—had he only noble blood in his veins! But to confess and proclaim before all our servants that she is dying for love of a peasant! What shame! what eternal grief!”

Wilfred had listened in silence. Several times he had turned his eyes away, and passed his hand over his forehead, as if struggling against a terrible resolution. He said hesitatingly:

“My Lord, if you are so unhappy . . . if you believe that your pure and sweet daughter is dying of grief because she has bestowed her love on a peasant . . .”

“Yes, yes, for that alone. Is not that a sufficient reason? People like ourselves cannot live without honor.”

“Well, my Lord, gratitude, compassion, love . . . tear from me a rash, perhaps a fatal confession. I do not even know—perhaps I may pay for it with my life, and even at a price still more precious. Part of the secret of my life I am going to divulge. Perhaps my avowal may console you, and reinstate the poor young lady, at least in the eyes of her father. Your daughter, Lord of Rotsburg, has not dishonored your escutcheon. The one whom she loves is not of obscure birth. He is the son of a nobleman.”

“Of whom do you speak?”

“I speak, my Lord, of myself.”

“Merciful God, what do I hear?” cried Sir Gouthier. “You are of noble birth?”

“Of a high and noble line,” assented Wilfred. “My father is a powerful Count, renowned for valor, and held in high esteem at court, on account of the extent of his estates. I am his only

heir, and as such have the right to the title of Count.”

Sir Gouthier’s eyes sparkled with delight: he rose as if to embrace the troubadour, but suddenly reflected, reseated himself, and asked:

“What is your father’s name? In what country does he live? You cannot reply to these questions? I understand: the same reason that forced you to deceive us as to your descent, causes you also to hide from us whence you come and who are your parents. I believe you without the slightest distrust. Everything betrays you of noble birth, with the education of a knight. But, alas! If you should continue to hide the name of your race, who in the world would accept the justification of my daughter? Would not our servants secretly ridicule our explanations? A troubadour who passed himself off for a nobleman, and of whom one does not even know the name!”

“I beg you, have patience with me, my Lord,” said the young man, in a supplicating manner. “I humbly beg you, listen to my prayer. On your goodness depends all my hope of happiness . . . And perhaps you will pronounce at the same time the future of your noble and sweet Basilissa. If you refuse, I am indifferent to everything, and will abandon myself to my fate with resignation.”

“Speak, what have you to ask me?” murmured Sir Gouthier with curiosity.

“I have already told you, my Lord,” replied Wilfred, “a sentence pronounced over me by a powerful enemy condemns me, under penalty of death, to wander unknown over the world for four years longer. If this merciless fate was not over me, I would make bold to say to you: ‘My Lord of Rotsburg, the first time my eyes rested on your charming daughter, my heart beat almost to bursting. Her simplicity, her sweet amiability, the sympathy that drew us irresistibly towards each other, soon kindled in me an ardent and pure love for Basilissa, and her sweet image has taken possession of me’ . . . Only this morning I learned that this sad adieu would not render me alone unhappy.”

Sir Gouthier shook his head and said smilingly:

“Alas, Sir Wilfred—I call you so, although I do not know if such in reality is your name—how can that help me, since this sad secret hangs over your life?”

“This is my prayer, my Lord. Let me depart. Once I am far away, tell your daughter that Wilfred, the one who loves her more than he can say, is of noble parentage, and that he has the right to bear the title of Count. This thought will console her and give her strength to accomplish the sacrifice asked of her. I have yet four years to wander unknown over the world. We are both young. For the indifferent the years will pass quickly; and for us who love,

they will also pass quickly, long as they may now seem. Well, my Lord, if you give me your consent, I will preserve pure and faithful my love for your daughter; and if I attain, without misfortune, the day of my freedom, I will run to you and on my knees ask the hand of Basilissa. My birth is illustrious enough to honor your shield. I will be a devoted son, and will make your daughter happy. Ah! be good and magnanimous! Consent, and in four years the sweet Basilissa will become my well-beloved fiancee.”

Sir Gouthier reflected a moment. Suddenly he rose, seized and pressed the young man's hand.

“Thanks, thanks,” said he. “It is as if for the second time you have saved my life. If Basilissa will wait . . .”

“God be praised!” cried Wilfred, overcome with joy. “She will wait. I feel it—the tie that binds our hearts is indissoluble! . . . Now, my Lord, I can leave. Each hour of my life I will think of her with love and gratitude, and of you, my generous protector . . . my friend, my father.”

## CHAPTER XV.

## BASILISSA'S WEDDING.

HE had already shaken hands with Sir Gouthier, who was accompanying him to the drawbridge, when the young man asked hesitatingly:

“And Lady Basilissa, can I not once more—?”

“But the servants who are about her? It is too dangerous: let us avoid any new complications.”

“I hope, my Lord, you will tell her everything; you will console her and give her courage, will you not? She will understand that I am governed by fate. Now, I must go; heaven give peace to Rotsburg.”

But he had scarcely turned towards the door, when Sir Gouthier held him back, saying:

“Wait a minute. Let me think . . . I believe you, but my child's happiness depends on it, the honor of my name . . . You are of an illustrious house? Your father is a Count?”

“I neither wish, nor can deceive you, my Lord,” replied Wilfred, astonished at the singular tone of this question. “As soon as the four years have passed, I will recover my liberty.

Then I will tell you my father's name—I will, perhaps, bring my parents to Rotsburg. My good and loving mother will wish to take her son's fiancee to her heart. In any case you will be the judge, and if you find that I have exaggerated my father's nobility and power, refuse me the hand of Basilissa, and so punish me by the greatest unhappiness that I can receive! But I fear nothing—I have rather underestimated the truth.”

“Four years,” murmured Sir Gouthier, speaking to himself. “My poor child will languish and be miserable for four years!”

He took Wilfred's hand, saying to him:

“Since I believe your words, why should I let you go?”

“What do you wish, my Lord?”

“If I give you Basilissa for your wife will you remain at Rotsburg? You do not reply! I need a companion, a friend to brighten my solitude. I love you; your mind, your education, your talent, will sweeten my life. Become my son, not in four years, but now, in a few days—as soon as we can prepare for the ceremony. . . . You hesitate, you refuse?”

“Oh! my Lord,” answered Wilfred, “your kindness confuses me. . . . But the fate which weighs on me? My name, which I cannot reveal. The secret of my life which I cannot yet betray?”

“Your secret will be respected.”

“And Basilissa?”

“My daughter also—I pledge her honor!”

“And no one will question me with regard to my parents?”

“No one.”

“I tremble with joy . . . and fear at the same time. God protect me! Am I dreaming? I, to become the husband of the sweet Basilissa! Thanks, thanks for a happiness so great, so unexpected!” . . .

“As to your family name,” replied Sir Gouthier, “I have thought of that. Until you recover your liberty, you can give us a fictitious name. That will effectually stop all curious researches after your true name. See. . . . You will be called Wilfred van Dornedal. Do not forget it. . . . Follow me now, and in this way, to-day, immediately, we will put a stop to our grief, and the indiscreet curiosity of the servants.”

He opened the door, and ushered the young man into a large apartment, where his daughter, surrounded by her women, was lying on a couch, weeping.

Raising his head, and with a proud look and solemn tone of voice, Sir Gouthier said:

“Recognize in the supposed troubadour the noble and powerful Count de Dornedal, your future husband and master.”

The servants stood respectfully and bowed low.

Basilissa half rose and looked at the troubadour, trembling with surprise and uncertainty.

“Yes, my child,” said her father, “the young man who loves you so ardently, and to whom you have given your heart, is a Chevalier of noble birth. Be happy: in a few days the Count de Dornedal will call you his wife.”

The young girl uttered a cry of joy and raised herself, extending her hands.

“God! My father, thanks,” was all she could articulate.

She wished to throw herself on her father’s neck; but strength failed her, and she fell, perfectly unconscious, in our hero’s arms, smiling sweetly whilst her pale lips murmured in a low voice:

“Wilfred, Wilfred, my betrothed!”

A few days later the wedding of the supposed Count de Dornedal with Basilissa van Rotsburg was celebrated in the Castle chapel. At the request of the bridegroom the number of guests was limited, but the wedding was quite brilliant. Wilfred sang the most beautiful songs, and touched all hearts by the charming poetry composed in honor of Basilissa and her father.

During the first six months they were very happy. Wilfred seemed to have forgotten the terrible fate which menaced him; he was always happy, and was so kind and considerate of his wife and his father-in-law that they thanked heaven.

But from this time Wilfred took a decided dislike to music and singing ; Basilissa remarked that he seemed to be more and more tormented by a secret fear. She frequently surprised him plunged in deep thought, his eyes bent on the ground. If she approached him at these times, he started as if from a dream, and tried to account for his preoccupation with some vague excuse. The idea that her husband was not happy, and had trouble in which she could not participate, deeply afflicted Basilissa ; but true to her promise, she did not ask him a single question on the subject ; inspired by her love for him, she affected a brightness that she was far from feeling, and appeared not to notice his actions.

Towards the end of the year the young couple received a terrible blow to their happiness. Sir Gouthier was taken ill from a cold caught whilst returning from a hunt in a snow-storm. He was confined to his bed for three months, suffering acutely, rallying now and then, but still in danger of death. Wilfred and Basilissa scarcely left his bedside from morning until night, watching him by turns and frequently together. They consoled and cared for him with so much devotion and such touching tenderness that the old man’s eyes would fill with tears of gratitude. How many times they thanked heaven for the slightest improvement ! No amount of care would benefit him, however ; Sir Gouthier must die. He embraced his dear children, gave them

his blessing, recommended Basilissa to Wilfred's tender love and care, and his eyes closed in death.

The death of Sir Gouthier, who was esteemed and beloved by all, nobles, peasants and servants, threw a cloud of sadness and mourning over Rotsburg for quite a while.

Wilfred, as well as Basilissa, was a long time recovering from this blow. This sorrow was so natural that his extreme silence did not worry his young wife. As long as this trouble lasted, Basilissa felt her anxiety diminish. Now she made every effort to withdraw Wilfred from this sombre mood . . . but she did not succeed. She soon came to the conclusion that her husband suffered from a secret sorrow ; and as he frequently started in his sleep, and on waking uttered cries of anguish, it was evident that he was a victim to a strange and continued terror. As she did not doubt that Wilfred's mental state was caused by the secret she had promised to respect, she could not question him on this subject, and always tried to distract and amuse him by being bright herself. But her husband's agitation increased so, that he frequently passed whole days in prayer in the Castle chapel, or, thinking himself alone in his room, wept bitterly. He gave up visiting, and seemed to shudder whenever the guard announced an arrival by sounding his horn ; he no longer hunted, refused all invitations from his neigh-

bors, and even gave up his walks, as if fearing to encounter some great danger outside of the Castle. Basilissa struggled for a long time, trying not to be discouraged; but finally one day, sadder than usual, she succumbed, and, being alone in her room, wept copiously, thinking of the bitterness of her life.

Her husband found her with her face buried in her hands, sobbing aloud. He was deeply moved, and feeling the greatest pity for her, seated himself beside her, taking her hand.

“Basilissa, my dear wife,” said he, “am I making you unhappy? Oh! forgive me, I am unfortunate; not only my own fate weighs on me, but you, whom I love with all the strength of my soul, whom I admire as the personification of nobility, goodness and purity, to think that I force you to suffer also! I am weighed down by my secret, which I cannot betray, you know only too well . . . And the secret is, as it were, a gulf between our hearts, and makes our lives doubly painful. I beg of you, have patience; let me suffer without trying to console me, and suffer silently yourself until I recover my liberty. A year and a half from this time, if God in his mercy protects me, I will repay you a hundred-fold for all your sufferings: I will love and honor you, and consecrate my entire life to making you happy.”

“Ah! my poor Wilfred, I do not accuse you,” she murmured, pressing his hands. “If I could only see you smile sometimes.”

“I do not wish to deceive you, Basilissa,” he said, very sadly. “My terrors increase as the time of my deliverance draws near. The danger which menaces me is so terrible, so frightful, that the agony may kill me before my deliverance.”

“Oh! my God!” sighed Basilissa, weeping again.

“Yes, my dear wife,” he replied, “the fate which menaces me is of such nature that I am in continual fear of its being realized; each day augments my danger, because the powerful enemy who pursues me must put an end to his work, or his victim will escape him. This conviction worries me day and night, and makes me tremble at the slightest noise, disturbs my sleep, and makes me incapable of thinking of anything else. Ah! Basilissa, if you only knew the fate which hangs over me! The loss of my love would certainly be terrible, but if this curse should be accomplished, it would be more terrible still! You sigh, my dearest? I am breaking your heart: this secret tortures your loving soul. Oh! how many times I have determined to share my troubles with you! But this confidence might be my death-blow.”

“No, no, Wilfred, keep quiet, I beg of you; do not betray your secret,” she cried, much frightened. “A year and a half is a long time, but you will not see me in tears again, and I will not complain. I will be patient, and pray-

ing God to protect us, will confide in His mercy. And you also take courage, my dear Wilfred; whatever happens, believe me, I respect your grief, and will never censure you.”

He thanked his good little wife, and from this time showed a little more confidence. Nevertheless this favorable disposition did not last long. Some months later Wilfred was more than ever a prey to these frightful anxieties; a terrible thing to contemplate, seeing him wandering through the castle like a troubled soul, his eyes fixed, his hair standing on end, talking to himself in a low voice.

Nearly a year passed thus—still six months before his cruel trial would be over. Certainly as his deliverance drew near Basilissa should rejoice; but could he endure the agony whilst waiting? He nearly always wished to be alone, grew thin and pale, and seemed always feverish. Wilfred felt doubly miserable. He, always so strong and hardy, even rash, now broken down, without courage, blushed at his own weakness. But he must struggle against his fate; he never forgot it. At night he dreamed that he had murdered his parents, and that in his blind rage he had mutilated their bodies, in order to steep his hands in their blood . . . Sometimes this frightful vision came to him during the day.

Basilissa could not understand this state of affairs. Her husband sometimes mentioned the word sorcery to explain his agony, but that

struck her as impious. Was it possible that the good, noble, pious knight, Wilfred, had dealings with the evil one! No! no! and she tried to banish this frightful thought, which continually returned.

## CHAPTER XVI.

## THE HERMIT OF THE BLACK ROCK.

ONE morning they were seated in the breakfast room, sad and buried in thought, when the watchman of the tower announced the arrival of a guest. As usual, Wilfred showed great uneasiness, and wished to leave the room; before that could be accomplished, however, the page ushered in Sir Oswald van Mavicksburg, a friend of the late Sir Gouthier. Wilfred, believing he had come to ask the hospitality of Rotsburg, wished to relieve him of his mantle and his arms, also to offer him refreshment; but he told them he had only come in passing to wish them good day, and after resting a few moments, would set out again. Wilfred called the butler to bring a jug of the best wine. Sir Oswald would not refuse to drink a glass with them.

When the Chevalier was seated, Basilissa said to him:

“Oh! my dear Lord van Mavicksburg, I am delighted to see you; since the bitter loss we have had, this is the first visit you have made to Rotsburg. What is the happy occasion that gives us the pleasure of seeing you? Have you been to court?”

“No, madame,” he replied: “A sad circumstance has led me to ask the help of the hermit of the Black Rock. It is from him I am returning, consoled and full of hope.”

“The hermit of the Black Rock,” repeated Basilissa, in surprise.

“What! you do not know this holy man,” said Sir Oswald. “The Black Rock is scarcely two hours’ walk from here, and if I mistake not, it borders on your estate. Do you no longer receive any one at Rotsburg? Do you no longer go to see your friends?”

“We well know the Black Rock,” replied Basilissa, “but were ignorant that it served as the retreat of a hermit.”

“It is astonishing,” said Sir Oswald; “for there is no question of the sanctity of his life, and he is renowned for the extraordinary power of his prayers. He cures not only most of the ills of the body by a single blessing, but he overthrows all the works of the evil one, especially necromancy, sleight of hand and witchcraft. Nothing resists his prayers.”

These last words so excited Basilissa and Wilfred that both of them fixed their eyes on the old Chevalier.

“You well know, noble Lady,” replied the latter, “that Ermalinde, my youngest daughter, has always been strong and well? Alas! for the past few months she has been ill, and the physicians cannot discover the cause of her illness.

She is pale and day by day grows thinner; nevertheless she does not suffer and is not confined to bed. I scarcely dare say it—she is bewitched. I went to ask the help of the hermit. Indeed, this man is a saint: night and day he prays. He lives on herbs, sleeps on boards, and passes his life in meditation and expiation for the sins of man.”

“Has he promised to cure your daughter?” asked Basilissa, with great interest.

“He has only promised to pray for her; but he consoled and encouraged me. I am convinced that to him I will owe the salvation of my child.”

“And this holy man lives at Black Rock?” thoughtfully asked Wilfred.

“Yes, in the very heart of the rock, several hundred feet above the water, in a kind of grotto. One could not find him did not a wooden cross indicate his retreat.”

After a little more conversation, the Chevalier took leave of them, the Master of Rotsburg conducting him to the drawbridge.

When he returned, Basilissa asked her husband if he would not see the hermit of the Black Rock, in the hope he would obtain aid and consolation. Wilfred feared this proceeding. If it should irritate the mysterious power that had possession of him! But Basilissa used all her eloquence to persuade him that the prayers of this holy man would assure him the protection of God.

He finally listened to her, and promised to go there the next day. But Basilissa, carried away by the hope of his deliverance, besought him to undertake this short journey immediately. The day was not half over ; in an hour he would be at Black Rock, and no matter how long he remained with the hermit, he could certainly return before nightfall.

Wilfred followed her suggestions, gave orders that two horses should be saddled, and he was ready to depart.

Basilissa embraced him with happy forebodings, and tried to inspire him with confidence. She went with him as far as the ramparts, encouraging him and waving her handkerchief until he was out of sight.

Wilfred, accompanied by a page, followed the course of the river, so absorbed in thought that he let the reins fall on the neck of the horse.

After riding for about an hour and a half in a deep valley where a foaming river dashed between two rocky hills, the latter haunted by crows and birds of prey, he reached a wild tract where the rocks seemed to have been thrown up by an earthquake. The river noisily struck the immense boulders that came in its path. The waters parted in twenty meandering streams, gliding like snakes between the rocks, reuniting farther down in a mighty torrent.

In the midst of this deserted spot, the Black Rock was the most desolate of all, reaching towards heaven its sombre crest.

About a hundred feet above the water, Wilfred noticed an immense black hole in the side of the rock, near which was a wooden cross, fastened in a cleft. He was puzzled how to climb this steep ascent, when he perceived a rugged path dug in the rock.

He could not explain to himself the terror with which this visit inspired him. It was as if some mysterious influence was forcing him to stop; but was this some powerful enemy, or a heavenly warning? He gathered his scattered courage, and determined, cost what it would, to prove it.

Giving orders to the groom to await him in a shady spot, he boldly climbed the rock, finally reaching the grotto. It was only an opening in the rock, forming an arch. Wilfred stopped and cast a timid look towards the interior; but the sun was low and he could scarcely distinguish the different objects.

The first thing that met his eyes was a kind of whip, with leather thongs having metal points, still reeking with blood. Although Wilfred did not see the hermit, he felt he should find him there, since he humbled himself so cruelly.

The Chevalier hesitated to penetrate further; scarcely had he taken a few steps, when he drew back in terror. In a dark corner a human body was extended lifeless, dead perhaps, on a heap of dry leaves. The face was buried in the leaves, and he made not the slightest movement.

The stupefied Wilfred contemplated it for an

instant; then, to satisfy his doubt, cried in a loud voice:

“Are you asleep, Holy man?”

The hermit moved his arm, and as far as Wilfred had confidence, he tried to help him; but only succeeded with difficulty. The old man repulsed him with a gesture, and leaning on his elbow; said:

“No, let me bear my own troubles. I am weak, my limbs are feeble, but that is nothing. What brings you here, my Lord?”

“They extol the power of your prayers, reverend father,” said Wilfred. “Your blessing cures not only the ills of the body, but destroys also the work of the devil. A frightful curse hangs over me; I come to beg—” . . .

The Chevalier’s voice seemed strangely to agitate the hermit. He listened a moment, his eyes sparkled; using all his strength to rise, he seized Wilfred’s hand and drew him to the entrance of the cave.

“Under the light!” he burst forth; “that I may see your face.”

Scarcely had he seen him than he raised his eyes to heaven, crying with joy:

“He lives! he lives! Wilfred van Isersteen.”

“Oh! my God! Nyctos! . . . You are Nyctos the sorcerer,” cried the Chevalier, starting back with astonishment.

“Your arrival delights me,” cried the old man. “What consolation! I have often trem-

bled and wept, fearing your fate had overtaken you.”

“You do not then see what is passing?” murmured Wilfred.

“No, my Lord,” replied the hermit; “I no longer know anything that passes on earth. The sorcerer is dead in me. I struggle to purify myself from sin, and I hope God will bless me before I die. But, Sir Wilfred, explain your unexpected appearance in this almost inaccessible grotto. What has sent you to this wild retreat? The mercy of God?”

“Or the devil, who wishes to ensnare me,” sighed Wilfred.

“No, fear not, my Lord: The prayers of a poor hermit under the protection of the sign of our redemption, are constantly uttered in this grotto. It is not at Black Rock the evil spirit will prevail . . . I am weary. Sit on that large stone and tell me by what strange combination of circumstances I have the honor of seeing you.”

Wilfred related the events of the past four years. The recital drew many a groan from the hermit; but when he was assured that no one about knew the name of the Chevalier, and that his noble and faithful wife respected his secret, his anxiety disappeared, and he only saw in the succession of events, the manifestations of the All-Powerful. Wilfred finished his recital in these words:

“And, reverend father, the nearer the end, the more difficult my life becomes. A nameless terror makes me tremble night and day. I have a presentiment that I will not accomplish my deliverance. The slightest noise causes my diseased imagination to fear the appearance of my parents. I see them; they are there before my eyes; I have murdered them, their blood stains my hands . . . I suffer a thousand deaths. They have boasted of your holy life and powerful prayers: I have come to beg them. Oh! help me! banish the curse that hangs over my life, and give my soul the peace it has lost. Otherwise I am lost. You are my only refuge. Have pity on me. I will bless you forever.” Wilfred threw himself on his knees before the hermit, his hands raised in supplication. The old man lifted him gently, saying:

“You implore my aid and my prayers. Ah! Sir Wilfred, you do not then know that every act of my life is consecrated to you. I have visited Rome. I have watered with my tears the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem. I have suffered hunger and thirst in the desert. It is six months since I returned from the East. I have chosen this grotto in which to pray and mortify the flesh . . . For whom do you think I have borne all this? For you, for you alone, my Lord! Do not then ask my prayers.”

“For me?” murmured Wilfred.

“For your safety, to avert the bitter fate

that threatens you, until I know the hour of your deliverance has struck.”

“Generous man,” cried the Chevalier. “How can I testify my gratitude? Let me kiss your hand.”

“I do not deserve such thanks, my Lord. There is also selfishness in all that I have done. My salvation depends on your deliverance.”

“Your salvation?”

“If your terrible fate is accomplished, if you steep your hands in your parents’ blood, my soul will be damned beyond redemption.”

“But you are mistaken, father: the soul of your friend, perhaps—that of the impious sorcerer who threw the spell over me.”

“I lied!” answered the hermit; “I lied to you. The fear of your first vengeance, the shame of my crime, have made me disguise the truth. Now I no longer fear death, and so think not of human respect. The sorcerer is no other than Nyctos.”

“Oh! heaven, what do I hear,” cried Wilfred, rising precipitately. “I have kissed the hand of the man who would make of me a parricide. Ah! you will at last be punished, son of hell! Every drop of your blood will not satisfy my vengeance.”

And stepping back, he drew his sword to thrust it through the hermit . . . But the latter bared his breast and looked at the furious man with so radiant a smile that Wilfred drew back, motionless.

“Strike, my Lord,” said the old man, “I deserve it. If I die by the hand of the victim of my wickedness, God imposes this last act of expiation, and I will go to my grave with some hope of obtaining his pardon. Do not hesitate.”

Wilfred, conquered by this strange resignation, felt his anger disappear, and was much frightened at the thought of the murder he had been on the point of committing, on a man who by his long repentance had no doubt been forgiven by God.

He placed his sword in its scabbard, and fell on the stone, burying his face in his hands.

There was a moment’s silence.

“My Lord Count,” replied the hermit, “why do you despair? If you had the strength to resist shedding my blood, it was because our Heavenly Father wished me to live, to assist you in the end. If we both struggle against our common enemy, our chance of triumphing must be greater on account of our united strength.”

“Horrible alternative!” muttered Wilfred, “to implore the aid of the man who cursed me . . . But since you are sanctified, and now can by your prayers break your own curse, do so.”

“I cannot.”

“You are then powerless for good, and so powerful for evil?”

“Prayer is the only strength. You are wrong my Lord, to have so little confidence. I, on the

contrary, see in all that happens signs of a superior protection, and my hope increases as the supreme moment approaches. And even what has happened to your parents since your departure . . .”

“My parents,” interrupted Wilfred. “Do you know how they have borne my loss? Are they still living?”

“About a year ago,” answered the old man, “after my return from the East, I visited Isersteen as a pilgrim, and saw your parents.”

“God be praised! And how was my poor mother? Had my father aged very much? Were they both well?”

“Yes, as well as possible, considering their grief. Time has softened their despair a little, although each hour of the day they grieved for the loss of their well-beloved son.”

“Ah! how happy I am,” cried Wilfred. “If my deliverence is accomplished, I can see and embrace them again. And do they think I am dead?”

“No, that thought would have killed them. After your disappearance they sent servants in every direction to search for your body; but these men found your horse at Harlebeck and knew that you had gone from the Eastern coast disguised as a troubadour with a lyre on your shoulder. As soon as this news was brought, your father started in search of you. He even traversed parts of the Netherlands and Germany,

sending faithful messengers in all directions: that shows God is protecting you, no one could trace you . . . Later a certain Lord of Hoock-stead came to tell them he had seen you at Arlon, where you were contending for a singing prize at a wedding feast. Your father immediately started for Arlon, and passed several weeks travelling the country between the Meuse and the Rhine. Who knows? he might even have passed Rotsburg. But a higher power had protected you from his searches; so he returned home after his fruitless effort.”

Wilfred’s heart beat quickly at this, the first news he had received of his parents. He was happy; joy sparkled in his eyes. But there was yet another cause for it. The old man had said, if there was an occult power trying to accomplish his fall, there was also a higher power watching over him. And now he hoped with the hermit that this protection would be his until the day of his deliverance.

For more than an hour Wilfred continued to question the hermit about his parents and country. He asked about the smallest details. His imagination carrying him even to Isersteen.

The hermit so encouraged him that Wilfred forgot his terrors. The old man repeated that he must have confidence in God, and in the efficacy of prayer. Everything seemed to show that he would be able to await the hour of his deliverance. Wilfred scarcely knew himself;

his heart beat freely, and he felt a sincere gratitude towards the man who had helped him gain this peace of soul. He thought of his good Basilissa, and the joy she would feel.

When ready to take leave of the hermit, he said: pressing his hands:

“Venerable father, at this moment I am strong and courageous, but who knows, if once away from you my terrors may not return? If so, will you permit me to return, and draw from you words of consolation and hope.”

“Return, Sir Wilfred, as many times as you wish. We will pray together. Go, heaven will not abandon you.”

Wilfred went into the valley, called his groom, and started for Rotsburg. How inviting and beautiful wild nature seemed to him now! How magnificent the sunset! What a superb sight this foaming and groaning torrent!

## CHAPTER XVII.

## THE CRISIS.

FOR more than six weeks Wilfred felt great confidence in heaven's protection. He was quite bright again, and several times, yielding to his wife's prayers, had tuned his harp and sung the most beautiful ballads.

Basilissa was happy, and thanked God for having restored to her husband the hope of deliverance and peace of heart. But little by little, his sleep was again troubled by frightful dreams, and his terrible thoughts threw him into frightful agony. The only way to chase away this frightful dream, was to go to the hermitage. So Wilfred went nearly every week to the grotto of the Black Rock, and always returned stronger and more confident.

Nevertheless, as the hour of his deliverance drew near, these intervals of tranquillity became shorter, and for the last few months he was assailed by these terrors, day and night, and in spite of the consolations and encouragements of Basilissa, he could not overcome these feelings.

At last the long hoped for and dreaded day of Saint Corneille arrived. The next day, if he could escape the curse, he would recover his lib-

erty . . . But he knew that the influence of the charm was acting on him more powerfully than ever, from his feverish agitation and the horrible visions that were continually passing before his eyes . . . He passed the greater part of the day kneeling with his wife in the castle chapel, but he tried vainly to calm himself in prayer. Chills ran through his body, mysterious voices seemed to murmur in his ears that the united efforts of Basilissa and Nyctos could not preserve him from his irrevocable fate.

His agony became insupportable; he was convinced that his fate would be accomplished that night, and although Basilissa would make every effort to help him, she could not prevent it.

“Ah! Basilissa,” he sighed, “I am so unhappy. My mind is so troubled. If you only knew my terrible agony, my torture, if you could only imagine what an awful fate threatens me! I cannot tell you . . . Ah! why did I not go yesterday to Black Rock? Why did I not put myself under the hermit’s protection this terrible night? He might have inspired me with some hope, and protected me from the frightful phantoms that pursue me.”

“But, perhaps God himself has given you this happy thought,” cried Basilissa. “It is not too late. I do not think, Wilfred, that your fear has any foundation; it is only a temptation of the evil spirits: but, since the hermit’s presence might relieve you from suffering, why do you not go to him?”

“Well, I will. Ah! how weak I am! Thanks Basilissa, for your good advice. I can still reach Black Rock before night. There, on my knees, by the hermit’s side, I will await with confidence to-morrow and the hour of my deliverance.”

Reassured and comforted by this resolution, the Chevalier pressed Basilissa to his heart, left the castle, and galloped towards the Black Rock . . . Very late that evening, Basilissa was seated near the table in the dining-room, her hands joined in prayer.

It had been a very warm day; great clouds had gathered since midday, and there was every reason to suppose that a severe storm was about to burst upon them. Streaks of lightning darted through the sky, and terrible claps of thunder shook the castle to its very foundation. A hard rain dashed against the windows.

Basilissa was thinking of her husband. The storm had disturbed her mind, frightful agony made her shudder; but she tried to console herself, thinking that by this time Wilfred ought to be at Black Rock, under the hermit’s protection. The storm soon cleared away, the flashes of lightning were less frequent, the rolling of the thunder was only heard in the distance, though the rain continued to fall in torrents.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

## THE TWO PILGRIMS.

SUDDENLY the Castle horn sounded, announcing arrivals. This surprised and frightened Basilissa. Had her husband returned in this frightful storm, instead of seeking the shelter of the hermitage?

Her uncertainty was soon satisfied. A page came to tell her that two pilgrims, worn out by fatigue and thoroughly drenched by the storm, begged hospitality for the night. They seemed old, but respectable people. Basilissa consented to receive them, and gave orders to the page to invite them in. The pilgrims shortly appeared and thanked her for her hospitality. She made them sit down, and ordered supper, watching them curiously all the while.

The man was tall and fine-looking; in her youth the woman must have been handsome, for in spite of wrinkled cheeks, her regular features showed traces of great beauty. Surely these people must be well born.

At first Basilissa only spoke of the storm, and assisted them to take off their wraps, whilst the servants brought dry clothing.

When they had reseated themselves and were

a little rested, Basilissa asked who they were, and how they came to arrive so late at Rotsburg? Perhaps they were wandering in a strange country: what was the object of their pilgrimage, Cologne or Aix-la-Chapelle?

“We were not lost,” the man replied. “The storm overtook us on the road to your hospitable Castle. We sought shelter in an opening in the rocks. Night fell, and again we started in spite of the storm . . . We are not only travelling through populous towns and countries, but through even the most isolated castles and forsaken countries, to find the object of our search. Alas! our efforts so far have been in vain; we are losing courage, and fear we will go to our graves without again seeing our child, our only son, whom we have lost. Perhaps he is dead.”

“No, no, do not lose hope,” said his wife, interrupting him. “Our son lives—my mother’s heart makes me feel it.”

“You have lost your child?” said Basilissa. “How unhappy you must be! And you are looking for him in this desert? Do you live far from here?”

“I live in Flanders, noble madame; I am a Chevalier and Count; my name is Foucard van Isersteen.”

“I am honored in receiving such noble pilgrims,” said Basilissa, “consider yourselves at home in my Castle, my Lord Count and noble Countess. My husband, the Count de Dornedal-

Rotsburg, is unfortunately away; but he returns to-morrow morning, and will take pleasure in showing you all the hospitality in his power . . . You are looking for your child so far from your own country: has he been stolen from you?”

“It is a sad and improbable history,” answered the pilgrim. “We have lost our son. He was handsome and strong, skilful in all manly exercises, courageous, good and loving. We loved him as the apple of our eye. One day, after having embraced us tenderly, he left us to go to the hunt, and since we have never laid eyes on him. We have searched in vain for him. I have made several voyages myself . . . The uncertainty and grief has destroyed our happiness; and now I, with his poor mother, am wandering almost hopeless around the world.”

“What could have happened to your son at the hunt? An accident,” sighed Basilissa with sympathy.

“My husband forgot to tell you, madame, that since then we have only once received news of our child,” said the Countess van Isersteen. “We know for certain that our son sold his horse at Harlebeck, and at that time he was free and in good health. How he could do so—he, the most loving of sons? How he had the heart to grieve us so I cannot understand. Who can explain this most incomprehensible mystery? And what is more strange, our son did not seem in the least troubled by being so far from his

country, because a Chevalier, one of my friends, saw him at Arlon in the midst of a group of troubadours . . . ”

“ Of troubadours ? ” murmured Basilissa.

“ Yes, noble Lady, and to the grief of having lost him is added the thought that he is ungrateful and has forgotten us . ”

“ Oh ! Foucard , ” cried the Countess, raising her hand in a supplicating manner, “ do not wring my heart so. Why in our ignorance should we accuse Wilfred of ingratitude ? ” In a bewildered manner, Basilissa cried :

“ Wilfred ? Your son is called Wilfred ? ”

But a sudden reflection and the fear of committing an imprudence, enabled her to overcome her emotion. She reseated herself and said, with a constrained smile :

“ And so he is called Wilfred ? Be not astonished at my surprise on hearing this name : it recalls certain memories. I had a brother called Wilfred. Alas ! he died on the battle field in the Emperor’s service . . . And your son has been seen in a troubadour’s costume ? ”

The Count and Countess van Isersteen looked at her in astonishment. She seemed to hide a secret, and awakened a suspicion that she knew their son, or at least knew where he lived.

“ Ah, noble Lady, ” said the Countess, “ no doubt you can give us news of our son. His name alone has touched you deeply. The recollection of your brother’s death could not pro-

duce such emotion. You are happy; make us the same. Be generous, have pity on the unfortunate parents who have languished for five years. Tell us that you know our child.”

Basilissa tried to escape from telling the truth by giving vague explanations. She reflected that more than once she had understood from her husband's words that his parents knew nothing of him. If she were to tell them that the Lord of Rotsburg was their son Wilfred himself, would she not compromise her husband's deliverance? To-morrow Wilfred would return free, delivered from his powerful enemy. He would be wild with joy at the sight of his parents; but to reveal his secret to-day might be fatal, and perhaps even his death-blow.

Strengthened by these reflections, Basilissa resisted the pilgrims' prayers, and finally convinced them that she knew nothing of their son, and that her emotion was caused by the remembrance of the death of her brother, whom she tenderly loved.

The check to their hopes so grieved the poor pilgrims that they begged leave to retire.

Basilissa showed them to a handsome room. When they expressed their admiration of the beautiful apartment and the richness of the furniture, she smilingly said:

“No, there are not many such rooms at Rotsburg—in fact this is the only one; but my husband would not forgive me, did I not show you

all possible honor. You are in my own room, my guest-rooms are not ready. No, no, do not refuse it. I retire very late to-night, and will go to the little room. Do not thank me. God bless your slumbers.” And without listening to more, she went down stairs.

She sat in the same place, remaining there about half an hour, with her head buried in her hands, reflecting on this strange event. These pilgrims were her husband’s parents, the Count and Countess van Isersteen. She had then discovered the secret which Wilfred had kept so long. His true name was Isersteen, and his father’s castle was in Flanders. But what was the cause of his flying the country and giving his parents so much trouble? A curse? What was its nature, and uttered by whom? And how happy he would be to-morrow to see his parents. There was no doubt of it, she thought, since he would be free. She had clearly understood from his heart-rending cries, that he still cherished great love for his parents.

Little by little her mind became calmer, and she rejoiced at the thought of Wilfred’s happiness when he pressed his mother to his heart.

She went up again to reassure herself that her noble guests were comfortable, and hearing their regular breathing through the half-open door, she concluded they were sleeping soundly.

She then told her servants to retire, after which she opened one of the dining-room win-

dows overlooking the valley. The weather had cleared. The moon shone brightly in the blue sky, and the fresh air which penetrated the room was full of sweet odors. After enjoying its freshness for a moment, she decided not to retire, but to pass the night in prayer. Leaving the window open, she lighted a lamp and returned to the chapel, and kneeling on her prie-dieu, begged the good God to cure her husband.

She was still in prayer when Wilfred accompanied by his servant was riding by the river returning to Rotsburg. He was tired, and completely discouraged and a prey to indescribable fears.

He had not found the hermit in the grotto, and had vainly waited several hours for him. The storm had overtaken him, and he was completely unnerved, thinking it an evil omen. He could not tell exactly what he felt in the grotto, but a cold sweat stood on his brow.

When the storm was over he tried to calm himself by prayer, but in vain. Threatening voices sounded in his ears, frightful spectres arose on all sides. He could not resist the longing to be once more near his wife, and to find consolation in her sweet words. When near Rotsburg he called the watchman, who, recognizing his master, opened the door.

Wilfred went into the dining-room, which to his surprise was still lighted, unbuckled his sword placing it near the mantel—his intention was to wake Basilissa, and beg her to share his agony with him.

## CHAPTER XIX.

## TERRIBLE TEMPTATION.

SUDDENLY his glance fell on a man's hat, placed on the back of a sofa. His eyes glistened; he became pale and frowning, whilst a bitter smile played about his lips. He was full of thoughts of vengeance, because he immediately looked for his sword. But his agitation was brief.

“I am crazy,” he murmured, shaking his head. “She, the sweet, the good, the faithful, the chaste Basilissa! The evil spirit is in me: he is accusing an angel . . . Away with such weak thoughts! Is this then the first time travellers, pilgrims or friends have sought hospitality at Rotsburg?”

At these words he rose, and mounted the stairway to join his wife. But he had scarcely opened the door of the half-lighted room, when he uttered a stifled cry. His hair stood on end, and he trembled in every limb . . . Had he seen clearly? The room was occupied by a man and woman. Was it not a delusion? All evils seemed to come at once. Ah! this was too much! . . . His eyes glared, the blood mounted to his head, a feeling of rage tore his heart, and he glanced with hatred at the unknown.

Then he murmured, “This sleep shall be their last. Every drop of their blood cannot pay for such a crime. My sword, my sword!”

He went down with quiet tread, dreaming only of blood, murder and vengeance.

He took his sword, and was already remounting the staircase, when he heard a door open behind him, and a sweet voice asked him:

“Back already, my dear Wilfred?”

He turned, and saw Basilissa coming from the chapel.

“Heavens! what does this mean?” he cried. “Do my eyes deceive me? Is it you, Basilissa? I thought I saw you upstairs!”

“You were in our bed-room?” she anxiously asked.

“Who, then, is there? Speak quickly! My blood boils in my veins.”

“Two pilgrims to whom I have given shelter.”

“Why in our room? That is never done.”

“We owe them every honor, Wilfred. Tomorrow you will thank me for what I have done.”

“You know them? I wish to know who they are! You do not answer? Oh! have pity! Do you not see how I am trembling with impatience! I command you: obey me.”

Basilissa approached him, put her arm around his neck, and whispered in his ear:

“I do not know, my poor Wilfred, if I have

done right; perhaps my fears are groundless; perhaps you will hear with joy the name of our guests. However it may be, I obey your will. They are the Count and Countess van Isersteen.”

“The Count and Countess van Isersteen?” roared Wilfred, in a terrible voice: “Great God! my father and mother! Oh! the curse!” . . .

He fell shivering on a sofa.

“Oh! Basilissa, unhappy woman, what have you done? My parents’ sentence has been pronounced by you! The curse will be accomplished. Do you know to what crime an impious enchantment has condemned me since my birth? If I meet my parents I must kill them with my own hands. There is no mercy: no earthly power can protect them; I am a blind instrument, a passive slave to the fate which controls me.”

His wife tried to recall him to reason, and to make him understand the madness of his words.

“Keep quiet,” he cried, “keep quiet, Basilissa; all is useless, I feel it. My brain is on fire. My blood is boiling. Fly, fly; leave me to my terrible fate! In a few moments I will be seized with a blind rage, and I will pierce the heart of my good and tender mother! See, it is commencing already.”

He rose and rushed for his sword, perfectly enraged.

## CHAPTER XX.

## THE FINAL STRUGGLE.

BASILISSA rushed towards the door of the stairway, uttering a cry of fear, closed and locked it, and threw the key out of the window. We have said that her bedroom was in a tower, and only communicated with the rest of the Castle by this one door. Consequently, with this door locked, it would be impossible for her unhappy husband to reach his parents.

Wilfred, now perfectly beside himself, threatened her, crying that nothing should stop him. He struck at the oaken door with his sword, but soon understood, in a confused way, that it would take great time to force it. He nevertheless continued, so that the entire Castle resounded with the violence of his blows.

The noise awakened five or six door-keepers and servants. Wilfred menaced them with his dagger, saying that he would lay dead at his feet the first who dared to approach him.

He recognized among them his valet de chambre, in whose devotion he had full confidence.

“Rigaud,” he cried, “obey me if you wish to live! Take a torch and seek below for the key

of this door. If you find it, I will give you five silver marks. If you do not find it, you will be hung to-morrow.”

And as Basilissa raised her hands in a supplicating manner, begging the valet not to obey, Wilfred, foaming and roaring with rage, raised his sword:

“Rigaud, if you hesitate another minute I will break your neck.”

The poor valet, seized with a mortal terror, said he would obey, and started immediately.

Wilfred continued his strokes at the door.

Basilissa, half crazed with terror, tried to take him in her arms and calm him.

And he, in spite of his violence, did not make the slightest attempt to hurt her, only repulsed her gently.

The terrible noise of these blows awakened the pilgrims: they went down already dressed, and remained behind the door, begging for assistance against the unknown danger which filled them with fear.

Their plaintive voices acted on Wilfred like oil on a flame. He screamed, and struck the door with such violence that Basilissa really feared it would break in pieces.

The red light of the torch from the terrace reflected on the dining-room window. Wilfred, rushing to the nearest one, put his head out of it, crying:

“Rigaud, Rigaud, have you found that key?”

“Not yet, my Lord.”

“Ten marks—I must have that key or your life.”

Basilissa had fallen on a chair completely unnerved. Profiting by the moments that her husband was talking with Rigaud, she explained to her men what had happened and begged them to use their united strength to take Wilfred’s sword from him.

Respect made them hesitate, but yielding to Basilissa’s prayers, they surrounded their master, took his sword from him, and threw it out the window, beyond the castle walls.

“Drag him out of the room!” cried Basilissa. “Take him to the prison above the gate. I will go with him. Fasten us up there until to-morrow, and do not open the door of the dungeon under any pretext. Do not hesitate, you will save your master’s life. I will be grateful to you and will reward you abundantly. Courage, courage!”

The men united their strength and tried to drag their master away. But he, as strong as a giant and furious as a lion, fought with rage, and striking right and left, overthrew several of his assailants. He was finally overpowered, and they dragged him slowly through the narrow corridor.

He roared, ground his teeth and foamed at the mouth, but in spite of his resistance he was carried out into the courtyard, which was brightly lighted by the moon.

## CHAPTER XXI.

## SORCERY CONQUERED.

WHEN the cortege drew near the gate, it had just been opened to allow a man to enter.

“O God be blessed!” cried Basilissa. “The hermit, the hermit!”

“What is the matter here?” asked Nyctos, alarmed.

“His parents are at Rotsburg: he is crazy, and wishes to murder them,” answered Basilissa.

“His parents here? Alas! alas!”

“Yes, yes, they must die; fate demands it, nothing else can be done,” shrieked Wilfred. “All is useless. Let me go. Give way, I must have their blood.”

“Alas, reverend father, my poor husband went to your hermitage; and if he had found you there, this dreadful state of affairs would not exist.”

“I had gone to Saint Mark’s church to pray before the altar.”

“And what can we do now? what can we do?”

“Fly from here immediately,” answered the hermit . . . “My friends, take him beyond the gate; do not release him. If you cannot do otherwise, tie him with cords. Be quick, be quick!”

And acting on the words, the hermit seized Wilfred by the arm, and made the others follow his example. Wilfred fought so furiously that in a few minutes he had repulsed them all and darted towards the Castle; but before reaching the end of the court, he was again seized and the struggle recommenced.

The roaring of the maniac, and Basilissa's groans, joined to the servants' cries, made a confused and frightful din, which resounded through the Castle.

Suddenly a noise, similar to a hammer struck on a piece of brass, sounded through the air. The hermit joyfully cried:

“Midnight! . . . Back, release him, the hour of his deliverance has sounded. He is free! Free and cured! Thanks, merciful God! my soul is redeemed!”

“My God! are you telling the truth?” stammered Basilissa incredulously.

“Let him rise, you will see,” answered the hermit, bending to assist Wilfred.

The Chevalier rose, and rubbed his forehead as if trying to collect himself. Memory came to him immediately.

“Delivered forever—free, I am free!” he joyously cried, lifting his hands to heaven. “Basilissa, my sweet companion, where are you?”

She threw herself on his neck, shedding tears of joy and gratitude.

“My mother, my parents!” replied Wilfred.

“Come Basilissa, you must embrace them. Fear nothing; my only desire now is to clasp them to my heart. The trouble has passed. I am calm. A bright light burns in my soul. Come, come,” and they entered the castle.

In the meantime Rigaud had found the key and opened the door. The Count and Countess van Isersteen were in the room, trembling with fright.

Wilfred opened his arms and pressed his parents to his breast.

“My father, my mother, I see you again! I feel your hearts beat against mine! God be praised! You must have blamed me. I have always loved you. A sorcerer had thrown a spell on me. I will explain to you . . . Here is Basilissa, my noble and faithful wife, my good angel. Love her as a daughter; we will live only to make you happy . . . Whether it be here, or at Isersteen, we will never leave you. This hermit, who was a great sinner, will go with us, and bring us the blessing of heaven. No more grief—only peace, joy, love and happiness await us.”

Joyous cries resounded on all sides, and when the sun’s rays first penetrated the salon, they brightened the reunion of Wilfred and Basilissa, the Count and Countess van Isersteen.

THE END.

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